Activity Theory as a Framework for Designing the Model of College English Listening

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Abstract

Activity theory signifies that activities are at the centre of human behaviour and it has been used to study cognitive process in many fields. Nowadays, college English listening learning is time-consuming but less effective in China, so enhancing the performance of listening instruction is a very hot topic. Theoretically, activity theory is able to provide a proper framework for analyzing motive, designing tasks, contributing rules and tools in English listening in English as foreign language environment. Therefore, it is necessary and significant to unify the activity theory to design a novel model of listening comprehension and to analyze the college English listening from a different perspective. According to the theoretical analysis, activity theory is a useful framework to design the model of college English listening and to provide learner-centered education.

Keywords: activity theory, learning activities, model of listening

1. Introduction

English listening is hard work and it deserves more analysis and learning. At the same time, in English as foreign language environment, college English listening (college students' English listening proficiency) has been paid so much attention, because it is a complicated process, in which students must discriminate sounds, understand vocabulary and structure, interpret stress and intonation, grasp speakers' meaning. In China, listening, which is time-consuming but less effective, has been the weak link in college English instruction. Therefore, constructing an efficient listening model for college English instruction is currently one of the vital research subjects to boost English listening comprehension.

Activity theory, which is an intricate framework that aims to analyze activity systems in human beings and to focus on the interaction between human activity and its relevant environment context, has been used to study cognitive process in various fields, such as computer-based learning (Zurita et al., 2007), personal learning environment (Blina et al, 2008), group working analysis in education (Choi & Kang, 2009), learning objects (Hansson, 2012), etc. So, in this study, the activity theory and college listening will be unified to analyze listening motive, tasks, rules, tools and outcomes in order to design a novel mode of listening comprehension and to analyze the college English listening from a new perspective in China.

2. Literature Review

Activity theory belongs to a concept of psychology which mainly claims that "activity" is the logical starting point and central area of the subject, so activity theory can be used to study and explain the occurrence and development of human behaviours. Originally, activity theory can trace its roots from the classical German philosophy of Kant and Hegel and Marxist dialectical materialism. In recent years, it develops and grows rapidly in the field of pedagogical psychology (Mosvold et al., 2011). Therefore, to some extent, activity theory is not a simple methodology but a theoretical framework and an interdisciplinary pattern for analyzing different forms of human behaviours in a socio-cultural and socio-historical lens.

2.1 Activity Theory

Activity theory is developed by Russian psychologists Vygotsky (1978) and Leontiev (1979). They claim: "Consciousness is constructed through subject's interactions with the world and is an attribute of the relationship between subject and object." Activity theory emphasizes that human behaviours and social changes should be

explained from the socio-cultural and socio-historical perspective so that any human activities can be viewed as a multidirectional, structured and interactive system.

Also, activity cannot be understood and analyzed outside the context in which it occurs. Therefore, activity theory usually includes four parts: (1) Activity is a complicated interactive process between human beings (the subject) and external environment (the object); (2) Activity possesses a variety of types and levels; (3) Activity has various impacts on people's existence and development. (4) Education should be concerned with students' learning activities and conscious learning must be rooted in activity, not as precursor to it (Jonassen, 1999).

Furthermore, activity theory mainly focuses on activities that have definite purposes, so the motive of activity has emerged from the contradiction that individual has perceived in the environment. If the motive has not appeared in the activity, the subject should conduct needs assessment to stimulate the motive. In addition, activity theory posits that conscious activity (performance) and learning are interactive and interdependent, so learning and activity cannot be divided; both of them are started by the motive. On the other hands, the object of activity can be anything that is material or conceptual, if the object is able to be altered by the subject successfully.

2.2 The Hierarchical Structure of Activity

Activity theory is an enormous conceptual system constituted by a series of basic principles rather than a highly predictive theory. The activity is an integrated goal-directed hierarchical structure that is linked by motive and goal. In addition, the activity is a conscious process, which includes a succession of action. Meanwhile, the action includes a succession of condition and operation as well. Therefore, the complete activity consists of chains of motive, goal, condition and operation, which is shown in Figure 1.
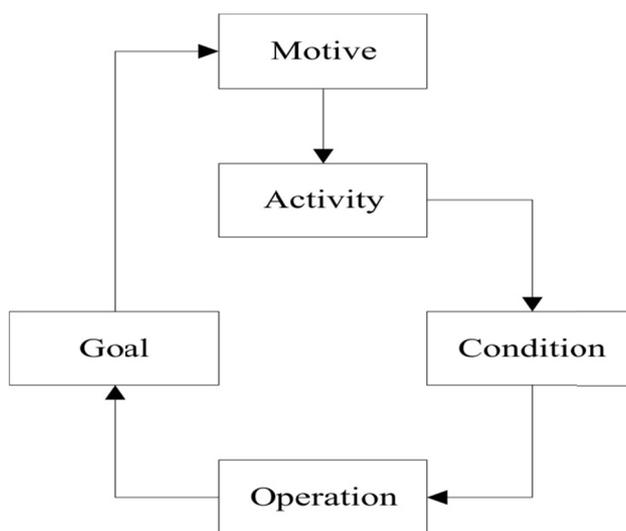

Figure 1. The hierarchical structure of activity

First of all, the motive is the sole criterion that stimulates a certain activity; the condition which the activity needs should be subordinate to conscious and purposed activity; moreover, the operation mainly depends on condition; thereby, the operation directly achieves the goal of action and helps the subject to obtain the new motive; therefore, another new activity will be spurred to start again. In a sense, activity theory can successfully solve the dynamic problem in the development of whole system and the hierarchical structure of activity provides the motive that supports the whole activity, condition, operation and goal.

2.3 The Units of Activity Theory

EngestrÖm (2008) has established an activity system model which is described as some triangles. In this model, there are four basic units: subject, object, tools and rules. At the same time, the subject and the object can form a community and the division of labor according to some rules. And finally, the object will produce the outcome. Figure 2 shows the details.

In the whole system, the subject of activity is an individual that engages in the activity. For example, in listening instruction, the subject should be a student who practises his or her English listening proficiency. The object of

activity is the physical or mental product that is sought, so it can be anything but the object must be acted on by the subject. Tools are used in the transformation process and they are mental or material agencies that intervenes the subject-object interaction. Rules are regulations or interactions in the activity. Community means participants sharing the object with the subject. Division of labor indicates power, tasks and status that are assigned to cooperating members of the community. Outcome can be some ideas, results or positive/negative emotional responses and it is affected by the actions and operations (Anthony, 2012).
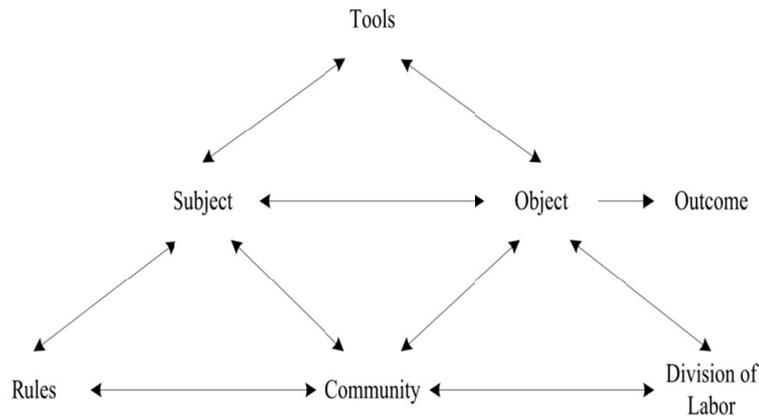
Figure 2. EngestrÖm's (2008) activity system model

2.4 Listening Comprehension and Language Learning

Being a vital skill for almost all interaction, listening is also the most important medium for input in learning a foreign language. Krashen (1982) puts forward "input hypothesis" and "comprehensible input" which indicate the importance of listening. Krashen holds that the comprehensible input is an important factor in second language acquisition and a comprehension-before-production approach can facilitate language acquisition particularly in the early stages.

Rost (1990) signifies: "... a listener's interpretation continuously changes throughout a speech event; it is not accurate to speak of sequential stages in listening, starting with speech perception. It is more accurate to think of the processes of perception and interpretation as continuous, overlapping and mutually informing from spoken utterances after the words have been recognized; their meanings computed and the syntax of the utterance has been parsed."

Therefore, listening comprehension plays a key role in facilities foreign language learning. Research has demonstrated that adults spend 65-80% of communication time in listening and speaking (Rubin, 1994). It means that foreign language learners will make greater use of listening skill. For these reasons, an awareness and deployment of effective listening model can help students to capitalize on the language input they are receiving.

3. The Implication for College English Listening Instruction

The core of activity theory is the practice or action, so the occurrence and development of this theory can provide a theoretical basis and guiding principle for designing and establishing the new model of college English listening in English as foreign language environment.

3.1 The Subject of Listening Activity

The subject is the executive of activity, so in college English listening instruction that is based on activity theory, students (the subject) are the central and driving characters in listening activity and their subjectivity must be clearly reflected. According to the analysis of activity theory, any activity is directly triggered by the motive which must be situational (Barab, 2004). In other words, the situation produces the demand; the demand forms the motive; and the motive activates the activity. Students' subjectivity, therefore, mostly depends on listening motive.

But the motive of listening activity cannot be easily activated only by two or three listening lessons; moreover, teachers' personal charisma or sense of humour sometimes cannot play a crucial role. Therefore, teachers and learners should borrow ideas from various motive models and strive for designing rational educational incentive

strategies depending on different teaching content. Gradually, students will gain autonomous learning ability and can actively practise listening without any external intervention. So in a complete listening mode, the subject's motive is an indispensable part.

3.2 The Object of Listening Activity

The object of activity can be anything, so long as it can be transformed by the subject of activity; therefore, the object is acted on by the subject; moreover, the process that the object transforms into the outcome usually represents the purpose or intention of the subject (Effie, 2012). Activity theory claims that learning and doing are not separable and that they are initiated by the intention. So in the activity of college English listening, the object belongs to students' listening proficiency or language skill and the outcome should be the mutual understanding of communicating parts.

In language learning, communication is the ultimate goal. Besides, the successful and efficient communication signifies that both parts of communication are able to cope with the changes of context, field and style. Therefore, because of the demands of object, the dynamic context and various authentic corpora can be input successfully in the listening model.

3.3 The Community, Division of Labor and Rules of Listening Activity

As mentioned before, any activity is contextually bound, so activity system is able to be depicted in the community in which it operates. The community can be individual or teams. The division of labor exists in the community and it will be distributed depending on the changes of participants in the activity. Meanwhile, rules of activity are always utilized to negotiate or mediate the relationship between the subject and the object. So rules are implicit or explicit regulations, criteria and customs that describe how community functions, and that limit the interaction between action and system.

In college English listening instruction, the community of activity refers to teachers and students; moreover, the rules usually act as the cooperation among them or as the communication among students themselves. With the changes of teaching content, the divisions of teachers and students vary. For example, in the communication among students, learners are speakers and teachers usually belong to hearers, but in the cooperation among teachers and students, learners are hearers or acceptors and teachers become guides. Therefore, in the process of listening mode construction, the complex relationship among community, division of labor and rules in instructional system should be carefully considered as well.

3.4 Tools of Listening Activity

Tools of activity theory are the methods that the subject acts on the object, so the nature of tools can be understood only in the context of activity. Tools can be anything used in the transformation process such as signals, language, computers, modes or heuristics etc. and tools are always altered by the ways which they have been utilized.

In the Chinese traditional listening instruction, passing the CET4 (College English Test 4) is the main teaching goal; therefore, teaching materials and exams are regarded as the most important tools. But with the changes of instructional methodology, the ultimate goal of listening instruction has turned into the mutual understanding so that tools should include learners' personal background, learning and listening materials, multimedia facilities and reasonable evaluating system, etc. Furthermore, the establishment of evaluating system should be emphasized because only a fair, rational and effective evaluating system is able to measure the operative condition of the whole listening activity.

4. The Designing Model of English Listening

According to the analysis of activity theory, a college English listening model has devised in English as foreign language environment. As a practical model, it must possess a kind of generality and inclusiveness (Zhang, 2013). Besides, this model should also be opened and it owns some distinct variables which have certain generative abilities. The theoretical model is shown in Figure 3.
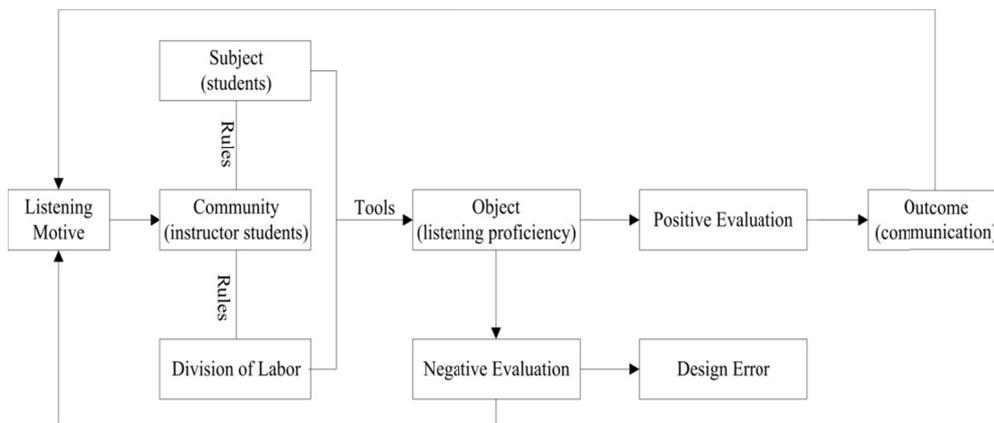
Figure 3. English listening model based on activity theory

First of all, learning activity is aroused by the motive. Moreover, this motive of active English listening practice mainly depends upon the learners' cognition of the value of listening activity, upon the adjustment of intrinsic motive and upon the proper stimulation of extrinsic motive. Therefore, in this English listening model, the first step is the activation of listening motive. All listening materials and content must appeal to students' attention and can arouse their curiosity so that they will be interested in what they are going to listen. Then, according to the specific listening context, related information or background knowledge should be introduced into learners and they can link listening goals with listening content. After that, students will own some confidence in their listening abilities and they believe that they can grasp or understand the listening material; furthermore, the listening goals will be achieved successfully. Therefore, if learners can possess strong motive, it will strengthen their confidence and listening activity will start smoothly.

As the core of the listening activity, students (the subject) should initiate various subjective activities guided by teachers to transform object (listening proficiency) so that the outcome (communicational abilities) can be produced successfully. Based on activity theory, through listening tasks students train their listening comprehension to generate language abilities so that in the different listening tasks, rules or principles vary in learning community (instructor and students). Accordingly, instructor and students should assign the tasks.

In these listening tasks, the mediator must be involved. In other words, what tools are used to act on the object? In general, tools are usually divided into two types: the objective tools which are directly used into the object and the tools of thought. The former includes listening equipment and multimedia system which are utilized extensively in colleges or universities. The latter means the teaching methods which are deliberately designed for different listening tasks. Therefore the process of listening activity is operational and the object will be influenced so effectively that the subject's language skills and listening proficiency can be improved significantly.

When listening model is analyzed and constructed, the ways and attitudes must be related, comprehensive and dynamic, so while the results of the object are summarized, evaluation system plays a vital role in the model. Evaluation can be positive or negative. If the evaluation is positive, it means the whole activity is finished and the object acquires the desirable outcome, which affects the purpose of communication. To some extent, students' listening proficiency has been boosted and the higher demand of learning will immediately spring up and likewise new motive, so another circle of listening activity starts again. On the other hand, if the result is negative, it signifies that the activity is unable to successfully finish and there is something wrong in the design of listening tasks and the learning motive and activity should restart. Therefore, in the evaluation system, the fuzzy evaluating methods in operational research should be used to assess the quality of listening activity comprehensively, objectively, scientifically and accurately so that the reliability of outcome can be guaranteed.

5. Conclusion

"Activity theory seems to be the richest framework for studies of context in its comprehensiveness and engagement with various issues of consciousness and intentionality" (Nardi, 1996). As a learning theory that is based on activity, this paper has described a framework for designing the model of college English listening in English as foreign language environment. Applying the activity theory to designing real-context listening practice should include the activity structures engaged by listening, the rules, tools and evaluating system. In

addition, experience in applying for this activity-based listening model is needed for further validation.

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