The Concept of “Object” in Activity Theory and Its Application in Classroom Research: A Case Study of a Phonetics Course

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Abstract

Activity Theory (AT) has its philosophical roots in classical German philosophy, in the works of Marx and Engels, and in the Soviet Russian cultural-historical school of psychology (Engeström, 1999). AT and the Activity System (AS) model developed by Engeström are widely used in a variety of fields in social sciences. In this paper, I consider how the AS model and the concept of “object” in particular can be adopted when researching the complexity and dynamics of teaching activity and its outcome on a phonetics course at a university in China. The findings indicate that varied “object” that each individual student is working at during the teaching and learning activities constitutes an important and direct factor leading to differentiated learning outcome in the phonetics course. A thorough examination of the relationship between the components of the AS reveals ways of narrowing the gap between the collective “object” that is constructed publicly and explicitly during the lesson and the individual “object” constructed silently and implicitly by each individual. The author argues that the closer the collective “object” is to the individual ones, the more rewarding a lesson will be to the majority of the students. Thus it is the teachers’ responsibility to identify various individual “objects” and to bridge the gap between the collective and individual “objects” in order to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning.

Key words: Activity Theory; activity system; object; phonetics course

1. Introduction

A language classroom is complex and dynamic, as various scholars point out (Allwright, 1986, 1992; Breen, 1985; Prabhu, 1992). Allwright holds that language lessons are both
social and pedagogic events, in which “the discoursal demands of lessons as ‘social’ events are inherently in conflict with the discoursal demands of lessons as ‘pedagogic’ events” (1992: 35). Prabhu argues that a classroom language lesson is four events (i.e., the pedagogical, methodological, social, and interpersonal) at the same time, and the four dimensions of the lesson are, more often than not, in unavoidable conflict with each other (1992). These scholars all emphasize the social nature of a language classroom and the co-constructive nature of language lessons. They view the language classroom as a small society with its own particular culture (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Breen, 1985; Holliday, 2002).

Given the complexity of the language classroom reality, it is not surprising that scholars and practitioners alike often wonder “why the learners don’t learn what the teachers teach” (Allwright, 1984). Research studies investigating the relationship between teaching and learning are constantly being conducted across the world (Allwright, 1998; Dobinson, 2001; Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001; Nunan, 1995; Slimani, 1989), the findings of which reflect and confirm the complicated picture of the language classroom and the learning process at large. To understand the teaching and learning which involves everyone present in the classroom, as well as all the contextual factors (Allwright, 1998) relevant to it, is a rather daunting endeavour if we do not make use of a suitable conceptual framework. I argue that Activity Theory (AT) and the Activity System (AS) model can serve our purpose here very well.

In this paper, I will illustrate how AT and the AS model can help us keep track of all relevant parties and aspects in classroom language teaching and learning. The concept of “object” in AT will be discussed in particular, and the process of constructing “object” in a phonetics course will be depicted in detail to show why differentiated learning outcomes exist among learners in the same class, thus indicating the complexity and dynamics of classroom teaching and learning, and the co-constructive nature of the learning outcome. The implications for language teachers and researchers will be proposed with a view to shedding light on ways in which we may maximize the beneficial effects of classroom language teaching and learning.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Activity Theory and the Activity System Model

Activity Theory has its philosophical roots in classical German philosophy, in the works of Marx and Engels, and in the Soviet Russian cultural-historical school of psychology (Engeström, 1999), and is widely used, for example, in areas of education, psychology, human-computer interaction, management, organization studies (Blackler, Crump & McDonald, 1999a; Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki, 1999; Lea & Nicoll, 2002; Nardi, 1997; Russell, 1997, 2002). Marx’s concept of labor activity—humans (the “subject”) by making and using tools (the “mediating instrument”) produces useful objects (the “object”)—serves as the source for the conceptualization of the term “activity” in Activity Theory. Thus, Vygotsky based his triangular model of a mediated action on this concept, as is shown in Figure 1.
The “subject” is usually the human being—the active agent in any activity—which can either be an individual or group(s) of individuals. The “object” is generally what the “subject” is working at. It can be a material object (e.g., a table that a carpenter is making), or an abstract concept (e.g., a theory that a student is trying to understand). “Mediating tools” not only include physical objects such as hammers and saws, but also culturally and historically formed artefacts, such as signs or languages employed by the “subject” in order to work on the “object”.

This triangular model of mediated actions seems to focus on individual actions, and does not entail the idea of mediation by other human beings and social relations, though such an idea is implied in Vygotsky’s theory (e.g., the role of the more experienced person(s) in the theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD)).

To overcome the limitations of the Vygotsky’s triangular model of mediated action (Figure 1), Engeström expands it into a more complex model: a model he terms the “activity system” (see Figure 2). This model adds three elements, i.e., “rule”, “community” and “division of labor”, to the triangular model showed in Figure 1, to form the social basis of activity. The following is a brief definition of the six components of the AS in Figure 2, using Wu’s (2002) adaptation of Rathbun (1999: 19).

- **Subject**: individual or sub-group whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis
- **Object**: tangible or intangible, what the activity is directed at and which is moulded into the outcome
- **Mediating artefacts**: physical or symbolic instruments/tools
- **Rule**: the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain action
- **Community**: multiple individuals and/or sub-groups sharing the same general object
- **Division of labour**: the horizontal division of tasks between the members and the vertical division of power and status

(Wu, 2002: 43)

To illustrate what this model means in concrete terms, I will use the example of a phonetics course (presented in italics in Figure 2). “Subject” can be an individual student, the teacher, or a group of students. “Object” is whatever the “subject” chooses to work at. It can be, for example, sound(s), a group of confusing sounds, intonation, sound linking, loss of plosion, weak forms, word stress, sentence stress. “Mediating artefacts” include course books; teacher’s lectures (e.g., on tips for pronouncing sounds, rules of reading, the use of
speech organs, features of connected speech); audio-visual materials for pronunciation practice and imitation; exercises and drills for practicing certain sound(s) and feature(s) of connected speech. The “rule” consists of the norms and conventions of the phonetics course within the classroom and also the wider institutional rules and regulations that govern the conduct of classroom teaching and learning in general. The “community” refers to the group of students and teachers who are involved and/or interested in the teaching and learning of pronunciation, intonation and other features of speech. “Division of labor” consists of the roles and responsibilities assigned to and undertaken by the teachers and students, and the power relations within them. The “outcome” of the course includes declarative and procedural knowledge of pronunciation, intonation, and other features of connected speech (Cheng, 2010).

Figure 2. Complex model of activity system (Engeström, 1999: 31) using my example of a phonetics course. Wavy lines are added by Blackler et al. (1999b) to represent incoherencies within and between components of the activity system.

This complex model of an AS (see Figure 2) draws our attention to the social contexts in which the activity is situated, and the possible relationships, i.e., the interaction and contradiction, between each of the pairs of elements of the AS, which may play important roles in the process of activity, thus helping us to understand the factors that Vygotsky’s triangular model of mediated action (Figure 1) is unable to account for. The interpretation of the AS model by Blackler et al. (1999a, 1999b, 2000) further clarifies the ways in which relationships can be analysed in an AS, as is shown below.

Blackler et al. (1999b), in their organizational studies, elaborate on the ways in which the AS can help interpret relationships, arguing that this model of an activity system is a way of “representing the relationships between personal knowledge and the cultural infrastructure of knowledge, and between individual actions and the broader pattern of activities of which they are a part” (p. 6-7). Blackler et al. (2000) view the AS
model as consisting of two triangles: the inner inverted triangle of “subject”, “object” and “community” that represents “relationships between individuals, their work colleagues, and the activity in which they are jointly engaged”, and the outer triangle of “mediating artefacts”, “rule” and “division of labor” that represents “factors that mediate these relationships” (Blackler, Crump & McDonald, 1999b: 7). They term the outer triangle as “the infrastructure of knowledge” (Blackler et al., 1999a: 208)—“material, mental, social and cultural resources for thought and action” (Blackler, Crump & McDonald, 2000: 281). They argue that the relations between each two components of the inner triangle are mediated by the component of the outer triangle that is between them. For instance:

the relations between individuals and the “object” of their activity are mediated by concepts and technologies (mediating artefacts), the relationships between the community and the overall “object” of its activity are mediated by its division of labor, the relations between individuals and the communities of which they are a part are mediated by rules and procedures. (Blackler et al., 2000: 281)

They also point out that

Activity Theory interprets practice as activity, explores the links between event and context … Activity theory features the intimate relations between the factors that mediate activity and the activities themselves. (Blackler et al., 2000: 278, 297)

Based on their interpretation of the AS model, I would argue that one of the most important advantages of the AS model lies in its power to explore the relationships between the components during the process of activity. Moreover, the discussion of relationships does not have to be restricted to the mediating relations that Blackler et al. (2000: 281) list above. For example, while examining the relationship between the “subject” and “community”, one may not only consider the “rule” as a mediating factor, but also include “division of labor” as a factor that may have an effect on the relationship between the “subject” and the “community”. A further advantage worth mentioning here is that the AS model visualizes the relationships, including the interactions and contradictions between the components through a triangular diagram as is shown in Figure 2, which is helpful in dealing with such a complex activity as classroom language teaching and learning.

2.2 The Concept of “Object”

As I will focus on the construction of “object” in my discussion of the teaching and learning in a phonetics course, it is necessary to elaborate on the concept of “object”. As is mentioned in Section 2.1, the “object” is generally what the “subject” is working at. “An ‘object’ is both something given and something projected or anticipated” (Engeström, 1995: 397). For example, students may be asked to read a passage aloud. The “object” is partly the content of the reading. That is the text assigned by the teacher, and therefore, students usually have some idea of what they are going to read, but they may not be sure
how they will read it, or what sounds, or features of connected speech, or techniques of reading they may need to focus on when preparing and practicing.

Additionally, and more importantly, the “object” is constructed by the “subject” and “gives shape and direction to activity” (Engeström, 1995: 397). In other words, even though the students are reading the same text, the “object” may not be the same for each student and hence each student may engage in a different activity. To use the earlier example again, students may have, for example, (1) correct pronunciation of vowel/consonant sounds as the “object”; (2) imitation of the intonation as the “object”; (3) the correct word stress or sentence stress as the “object”; or (4) appropriate use of pauses as the “object”. In each case, the student is engaged in a different activity because he or she is working at a different “object”.

Therefore, the “object” is not static, nor the same for everyone; rather, it is the product of the activity of the “subject” and is only fixed when the activity comes to an end. For example, when a blacksmith sets out to make a spoon, he has a rough idea of what a spoon looks like. However, the exact shape of the spoon (e.g., whether the bowl looks more like a circle or an oval), the decoration and pattern on the handle, and the precise size of the spoon may be constantly modified during the course of manufacturing. Such modifications may result from casual discussion between the blacksmith and a friend, a picture in a book he happens to come across, or just some inspiration popping into his mind when he is working on the spoon. Details of the spoon may change during the whole manufacturing activity, and only when the spoon is finished can the exact “object” of this activity be finally fixed (Blackler, personal communication, April, 2003). As Leont’ev puts it, “the object of activity is twofold: first, in its independent existence as subordinating to itself and transforming the activity of the subject; second, as an image of the ‘object’, as a product of its property of psychological reflection that is realized as an activity of the subject and cannot exist otherwise” (Leont’ev, 1978: 52). What he suggests is similar to Engeström’s view (1995): the “object” is disclosed at the beginning of the activity, directing and transforming the activity, yet at the same time, the “object” is a product of the activity of the “subject”, existing and being realized only within and through the activity.

In what follows, I will use two excerpts from the class sessions of a phonetics course to show how the “object” is constructed and co-constructed during the classroom teaching and learning, so as to demonstrate the complexity and dynamics of the language classroom.

3. The Case Study—Construction of the “object” in a phonetics course classroom

The phonetics course under discussion here is for first year English majors at a university in East China (taught by the author). All the students will become English teachers in primary or secondary schools upon graduation. The purpose of this course is therefore to help them improve their pronunciation, and to introduce to them basic theories and ways of teaching pronunciation and intonation to their future students.
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3.1 The AS of the Phonetics Course

The “subject” of the AS is student(s), from whose point of view the AS is constructed. The “object” that is partly fixed by the teacher includes procedural and declarative knowledge of all English sounds, intonation, word stress, sentence stress, weak forms, pausing, and other features of connected speech. The “object” proposed by the students at the beginning of the course mainly refers to the procedural knowledge of pronunciation and intonation. They are not clear about what else is involved in the course, or what they need to learn from the course to help them become effective English teachers in the future. However, what exactly the students choose to work at from session to session is not certain yet, and will be further discussed below. The “mediating artefacts” include course books, audio-visual materials, classroom tasks and exercises, after class tutorials by teaching assistants. The “community” consists of students, teachers, teaching assistants, and others who are concerned about the teaching and learning of this course. The “rule” of this course refers to the routines of classroom conduct, assessment requirements, homework and assignments, and the like. As for the “division of labor”, the teacher takes most responsibility in the designing of the course content and procedure, methods of delivering the course and assessment, whilst the students may choose supplementary materials for extra practice. The teacher has a more powerful status in decision making, while the students are at the relatively passive end. Sometimes the teacher let the students decide on certain class procedures, depending on the students’ willingness in decision making. Of course, the “rule” and “division of labor” may also change in certain circumstances, instead of being static all the time. For example, as the phonetics course precedes, the teacher may let the students decide whether a certain exercise should be practised in class, or how much time they would like to spend on a certain exercise, or whether certain content should be covered in class, etc. In other words, as the students’ knowledge and competence in phonetics increase, they may take more responsibility and be more active in the decision making process of this course. In this way, the “rule” and “division of labor” of the AS are reshaped.

In the following part, the construction of the “object” of the AS will be discussed in more detail to show how the concept of “object” may help us understand the dynamics of the classroom.

3.2 Construction of the “Object”

In this part, I will use two excerpts from the phonetics course to illustrate the unique features of the “object” in the AS. In so doing, I will show the multiple factors that may be involved in the classroom teaching and learning process, and the complicated relations between the factors that may have impact on the learning outcomes.

3.2.1 Transcript 1

(T: teacher. M1: male student 1 in transcript 1. F1: female student 1 in transcript 1, and so on. L1: line 1, and so on. Notes are provided within ( ). English translation for Chinese is provided within [ ].)
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L1  T: Nasal consonants. The nasals. Right, I'll ask one of you to read all three. Read all three of them. 三个都读一下[Read all three sounds]. (3s pause) M1: The three nasal consonants. 三个鼻音，鼻辅音[The three nasal consonants.] Try to distinguish between them. Ok? The first one?

L2  M1: /m/, /n/, /ən/.

L3  T: 加了一个什么音啊，加了一个/ə/音吗[What sound did you add? The /ə/ sound]?

L4  M1: 没有[No].

L5  T: Try again.

L6  M1: /mən/[(student mispronounced sound /m/ as /mən/)].

L7  T: /mən/你是加了个/ən/，加了/ə/和/n/这两个音.[You add two sounds /ən/, the /ə/and /n/ sounds.] 好，不要加元音，再试试看.[Ok, no extra vowel sound. Try again.] The first one?

L8  M1: /m/.

L9  T: Yes, good. The second one?

L10 M1: /m/, /m/(student confused /n/ with /m/).

L11 T: 第二个，第二个好像不是很对.[The second one doesn’t seem quite right.] Try again.

L12 M1: /m/.

L13 T: 那第三个呢[What about the third one]?

L14 M1: /m/[(student mispronounced /ŋ/ as /m/). (laugh)].

L15 T: (laugh). Now the first one, correct. No problem. The second and the third, how to… What’s the difference between them? 第二个和第三个我没听出来区别嘛[I can’t tell the difference between the second and third sounds].

L16 T: You read the first one, and first three words. 把第一个读一下，然后第一个的前三个例子读一下[Read the first sound, and the first three sample words].

L17 M1: /m/, mine, summer, sum.

L18 T: Ok, good. And the second one? 发一下，然后体会一下你是，呃…发音的器官，口腔里面，主要是舌头，比如说舌头啊，嘴唇啊，有什么样的特点[Pronounce the second sound. Try to feel the organs of speech, within your mouth. The tongue, in particular. The tongue and the lips. What do you do with them?]. 第二个[the second one], the second one.

L19 M1: /m/[(M1 mispronounced sound /n/ as /m/)], nine, sin, sinner, sun

L20 T: 好，我感觉你的舌头好像有点不对，你舌头放在哪儿?[Ok. I don’t think your tongue is quite in the right place. Where is your tongue?] 第二个音[The second sound]?

L21 M1: Close to my ... 上齿龈[upper teeth ridge], 硬腭[hard palate], 上面[up there].

L22 T: 好，那你再发一下[Ok, pronounce it again].

L23 M1: /m/.

L24 T: 那你双唇呢[What about your lips]? 双唇不能闭拢哦[You can’t close your mouth tightly]. 所以有时候听上去跟第一个稍微有一点像[That’s why the
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second one sounded like the first one]. 好, 舌头是放在上...舌尖抵着上齿，舌尖抵着上齿，然后呢开口[Ok, tongue tip touches your upper teeth, and open your mouth].

L26 M1: /n/.
L27 T: 好[good], /n/, 这样就对了[That’s right], /n/. 好, 第一个单词再读一下[Good, the first word again], the first word.
L28 M1: /n/.
L29 T: N-I-N-E.
L30 M1: /nai/.
L31 T: /nai/, 后面这个/n/呢[What about the second /n/]? /nain/.
L32 M1: /nain/.
L33 T: 对, 到词尾, 你就没发咯, 这个音有点弱[You missed the /n/ sound at the end of the word. The sound is too weak]. /nain/.
L34 M1: /nain/.
L35 T: (laugh), 鼻音一定是很清楚, 鼻音也可以拖长, 鼻音可以拖得比较长[The nasal consonant must be clear. You can make nasal consonants long]. 第三个词再读一下[Read the third word again], S-U-N.
L36 M1: /sq:n/.
L37 T: /sqn/.
L38 M1: /sqn/.
L39 T: 这个元音是短音哦[It’s a short vowel], ok, short vowel, /sqn/.
L40 M1: /sqn/.
L41 T: 好, 舌尖一定要抵到上齿哦, 上齿龈[Your tongue tip must touch the upper teeth, upper teeth ridge]. The third one.
L42 M1: 是不是这样啊[Like this?], /n/ (laugh).
L43 T: 好, 你的舌头位置有没有变呢[Ok, did you change the position of your tongue]?
L44 M1: 没有[No].
L45 T: 没有变就不对了哦[That’s wrong] (laugh).
L46 M1: (laugh).
L47 T: 我们发这个/n/, 前面一个n, /n/这个音的时候, 你感觉是鼻子, 好像鼻尖这部分, 鼻腔的前部在振动, /n/, /n/. 你再发这个, 第三个音的时候你要是感觉你的鼻腔后部, 比较靠近舌后这个地方在动, /η/, /η/[For the former sound, /n/, when you pronounce it, you’ll feel the front part of your nasal cavity vibrating; whereas for the third sound, you should feel the back of your nasal cavity also vibrating. The part close to your tongue back, /η/, /η/ ].
L48 M1: /η/.
L49 T: 舌头要落下来, 舌头不能再放在上面了, 舌头落下来[Tongue tip down. You can’t let your tongue tip touch the upper teeth any more]. /η/.
L50 M1: /η/.
L51 T: /η/. 然后感觉舌后有点往上抬的, 就是舌头往后缩一点, 不要再碰到牙齿[You should feel your tongue back raised, and your tongue drawn back. Don’t let your tongue touch your teeth]. /η/ (…)
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T: Ok, good. Thank you. So, clear? …No? Who said no? 是F1吗[Is that F1]?
F1: Yeah.
T: What’s your problem?
F1: 也许是因为我们乡音的缘故[Maybe it’s because of the dialect in my hometown].
T: 哦，哪一个音[Yes, which sound]?
F1: 就那个第二和第三个[The second and third].

Transcript 1 comes from one of the early sessions at the beginning of the first term, in which the teacher attempts to introduce, in a systematic way, all 44 English sounds to the students, by demonstrating the correct pronunciation, indicating the organs of speech involved in pronouncing each sound, and discussing tips for correctly pronouncing the sounds. In so doing, the teacher hopes, on the one hand, to identify the students’ weaknesses and most problematic areas, as a guideline for the teacher’s future lesson planning. On the other hand, the students can realize what pronunciation problems they have and what individualized weekly plans they can make accordingly for their after-class practice.

In Transcript 1, nasal consonants were the focal point being discussed. M1 was picked randomly to read the three nasal consonants. It so happened that M1 had great difficulty in distinguishing between /m/ and /n/ sounds—he shut his mouth for both sounds (see Transcript 1 LL8, 10). He confused /ŋ/ with /n/ sounds (see LL42-46). He sometimes neglected the final /n/ in some words (see LL29-34). His problem with one of the vowels (i.e. sound /ʌ/ in word “sun”, which he mispronounced as /a:/) was also accidentally disclosed (see LL36-40). The transcript shows that the general topic, nasal consonants, was set by the teacher. However, what actually was talked about and worked at (i.e., the “object” the teacher tried to guide the student to construct) turned out to revolve around M1’s problems—the teacher’s input was directed at his difficulties and errors: his errors were identified, corrected and practised. Those students who have problems similar to M1’s may benefit from this activity; whereas those who have totally different areas of difficulties concerning nasal consonants may have to follow the direction determined by the teacher and M1, and wait for other opportunities to have their problems exposed and discussed, and their errors corrected. More often than not, especially at the beginning of the year when the teacher does not know the students well, which problems each student may have and when such problems may present themselves are unpredictable. If the teacher happened to pick another student to pronounce the nasals, he or she may not have the same problems as M1, but may, for instance, confuse /n/ with /l/. Then the teacher’s input will focus on the difference between the nasal and lateral consonants, which is also a common problem for many students. The “object” that the teacher and students are working at will then be adjusted accordingly. The direction of the classroom activity and the construction of the “object” of the activity are thus shaped under the joint work of the teacher and students.

Of course, I am not saying the teacher and students have no control whatsoever over the direction of the evolving “object”. It is the teacher who sets the topic and initial task.
and may also prepare materials to help the students expose their potential problems. The students can also make conscious moves to change the course of the teaching and learning activity, as Student F1 did as in Transcript 1. She posed her question on sounds /n/ and /ŋ/, which were similar to M1’s problem, and got the teacher to explain the point for her. Transcript 2 will show clearly the active role a student can play in the shaping of the “object”.

3.2.2 Transcript 2

(T: teacher. M1: male student 1 in transcript 2. F1: female student 1 in transcript 2. L1: line 1, and so on. Notes are provided within ( ). English translation for Chinese is provided within [].)

L1  T: Let’s deal with task 1, task 1. We’ll distinguish between…We’ll divide them into two pairs: /i:/ and /i/, /e/ and /æ/. We distinguish between /i:/ and /i/, /e/ and /æ/. Anyone would like to read the exercise for /i:/ and /i/. (8s pause) Compare these two sounds. (5s pause) Anyone? F1 (volunteer). Yes, go ahead. You read the sounds first, ok. Two sounds. And then pairs of words. Go ahead.

L2  F1: 怎么读啊[How to read them]?

L3  T: 就是两个音先读一下, 然后词是一对一对地读, 一组一组地读[The two sounds first, and the pairs of words. Pair by pair]. 两个两个读[two by two].


L5  T: Ok. Good. What do you think of your reading?

L6  F1: 有点紧张[A little bit nervous].

L7  T: All right. That’s ok. About the two sounds, 这两个音你自己觉得读得怎么样[What do you think of your pronunciation of the two sounds]?

L8  F1: 也许单独读音标还可以, 放到那个单词中就有点混淆[I’m fine with the individual sounds, but I confuse them in the words].

L9  T: Yes, exactly. 你这两个音放在单词里面有点混在一起, 关键是你/i:/放到单词里面开口就变大了, 比如说你再发一下deep这个词[You confuse them in words. The thing is, when you pronounce /i:/ in a word, you open your mouth too widely. Say “deep” again].

L10 F1: /dip/.

L11 T: /dip/, /i/, /i/这样的音[it sounds like /i/]. /i/ deep, 应该是/dip/ [should be /di:p/].

L12 F1: /di:p/, /di:p/

L13 T: 对了, 这样就区分开来了[Right, now you can distinguish them] (...). Ok, so /i:/, when you pronounce /i:/, the opening, you should open your mouth very narrowly. 上下齿几乎是合在一起的了[Your upper teeth almost touch your lower teeth]. And another problem, how do you pronounce /gr/ together? G-R-E-E-N这里的/gr/这个字母组合, 辅音群应该怎么来读[The consonant cluster / gr/, how to read it]?
L14 F1: /gɔriːn/.
L15 T: /g/ 和 /r/ 分得太开了一点 [You over-separate /g/ from /r/], 不是 [not] /gɔriːn/, 是 [but] /griːn/. /g/ 和 /r/ 放在一起的时候呢 [when /g/ comes together with /r/], /g/ 本来是口型扁的, 是吧。但是 /r/, 发这个 /r/ 的时候是收圆的 [Your mouth is spread for /g/, but rounded for /r/]. 那么我们在发 /g/ 的时候呢 就要先把嘴巴收回来了。不是发成 /g/ 而是 /g/ (开口收小), /griːn/ [So when we pronounce /g/, we make our mouth rounded. Not spread /g/, but rounded /g/].
L16 F1: /gɔriːn/. (…)
L17 T: /g/ 和 /r/ 几乎要, 中间要听不出来有这个停顿, 不可以停哦 [/g/ and /r/ are pronounced almost simultaneously. No pausing between them]. 不是 /g/ 发好了 再发 /r/ [You don’t fully pronounce /g/ and then follow with /r/], 是 [it’s] /griːn/.
L18 F1: /griːn/, /griːn/.
L19 T: Yes, very good.
L20 F1: Thank you.
L21 T: /griːn/, /griːn/. Right. 好。这个辅音群呢也经常会有同学会有问题, /g/ 和 /r/ 中间呢就停了太久了, 甚至听上去有一个 /ə/ 音在里面, /gə/ 发好了再发 /iːn/ [Many students have difficulty pronouncing the consonant cluster /gr/, with too long a pause between these two sounds. Sound like there’s an /ə/ between the two sounds]. Ok, would anyone else like to read this exercise?

Unlike M1 in Transcript 1, F1 in Transcript 2 volunteered to read the exercise, thus consciously directing the focus of the activity to her performance and problems, which also earned her a good opportunity to identify some hidden problems that she had not been aware of before (see Transcript 2 LL4, 14). From Transcript 2, we can see that F1 was aware that she could pronounce /iː/ and /iː/ correctly as individual sounds, but had a problem distinguishing them in words (see L8). The awareness of her own problem may well have motivated her to volunteer to read in class and get her errors corrected. However, Transcript 2 also shows that F1 did not know what exactly went wrong with her pronunciation of the two sounds (LL4-12), which means she didn’t know exactly what could happen when she read the exercise in class. What happened next depended on the teacher’s response to her performance, including comments on her errors and suggested ways of improvement. Although the teacher planned to focus on the vowel sounds, when F1 made mistakes with the consonant cluster /gr/, the teacher nevertheless chose to deal with it. In this sense, it is again the joint work of F1 and the teacher, which directed the course of the classroom activity. The teacher alone or F1 alone could not have possibly determined exactly the “object”. However, F1 in Transcript 2 certainly had a more active role than M1 in Transcript 1, as she became the focal figure voluntarily.

It is also evident that a great deal of uncertainty exists during the course of the classroom activity. For instance, if, during the wait time (altogether 13s), someone else had volunteered to read before F1 did, or if F1 were shyer and had decided not to volunteer, it would be highly likely that the “object” of that activity would have been different, because it would be very unlikely that the other students would make exactly the same errors as F1 did.
Due to logistic constraints, recordings of other forms of classroom activity, such as pair work and group work (i.e., interactions between students and students), were not possible. Considering the focus of the current discussion—the construction of the “object” of classroom teaching and learning, and considering the social and interactive nature of language classrooms, I assume that the two transcripts will suffice to illustrate the process of shaping and reshaping of the “object”.

3.2.3 Summary and Discussion
The two transcripts above show that any classroom teaching and learning activity is the co-production of everyone present in the setting. The teacher’s plan serves as the basis on which all participants start to construct the “object” of the lesson. Whether participating voluntarily or passively, the students contribute to the direction of the activity, and the teacher’s responses to students’ performances further adjusts the shape of the “object”. Uncertainty always exists during a lesson, and only when it comes to an end can one be sure about the trajectory of the classroom teaching and learning activity, and see the final form of the “object” as fixed.

Figure 2 shows the possible factors that may alter the course of the activity. For example, the “subject” component reminds one of the individual differences among the students and teachers, such as their motivation, their past learning and life experiences, their personality, their learning style, all of which may have a role in shifting and modifying the focus of a teacher’s teaching, or the emphasis the teacher puts on different exercises and tasks. Accordingly, it is not difficult to understand that for different cohorts of students, the teaching content that is emphasized varies to some extent, and hence what the students are able to take away from the course varies too.

The “community” component shows the relationship between the teacher and students and among the students themselves, which contributes to the cultivation of the rapport among the members of the “community”. Such investigation may help teachers foster an agreeable classroom atmosphere and culture that encourages students’ engagement in the classroom teaching and learning. The “mediating artefacts” component shows the effect of the course materials being used, the tasks designed, the methods of teaching employed, or any of the other tools used in teaching and learning.

In short, each of the components in the AS model contains some potential contributing factors that may change the direction and course of classroom teaching and learning. This, in turn, shows that the classroom language teaching and learning is a highly unpredictable, complex and dynamic process that is influenced by multiple factors. The AS model can help teachers keep track of those multiple factors and better understand life in a language classroom.

4. Implications and Insights
In the forgoing sections, I have tried to show how the concept of “object” in AT can help us construct a detailed picture of what is going on, moment by moment, in a language
classroom. The two transcripts demonstrated the dynamic and co-constructive nature of classroom teaching and learning, and the potential multiple factors that may contribute to the shifting “object” of the teaching/learning activity. The immediate implication for all language educators is that through a thorough examination of all the components in the AS, teachers are able to identify the factors (in each component) that may benefit students’ learning and try to maximize their effect, while avoiding and minimizing the effect of any harmful factors. The most essential criterion for distinguishing between the beneficial and harmful factors is whether a factor can minimize the gap between the visible “object” that the whole class is collectively constructing at a certain moment, on the one hand, and the more or less invisible “object” that an individual learner is trying to construct for him/herself at the same time, on the other. Generally speaking, more vocal learners will usually make their personalized “object” more influential in the shaping of the collective “object” than those more silent learners, and thus, to some extent, benefit more from the classroom teaching and learning process. It is the teachers’ job, then, to explore the “objects” of those less vocal learners’ to ensure that the “object” that the whole class collectively constructs is based on the individual “objects” of the majority in the classroom. In order to do this, the teachers need to plan pedagogical moves that can help them in this exploration.

My suggestion is that the teachers refer to the AS model (Figure 2) in their lesson planning stage, and consider each and every one of the components in turn. Take the “subject” component for example. The “subject” (i.e., the students in this case) is the active agent in the construction of the “object”. It is highly necessary and essential to stimulate the active agency in them and encourage their voluntary engagement in the classroom learning activities so that teachers can identify the students’ individual or personalized objective ie, “object”, in learning. Several steps of awareness raising activity and positive reinforcement proved effective in my case study. First, acknowledging the voluntary contribution of those active participants in the classroom activities by detailed comments on their performance and constructive advice for their further practice. In so doing, I demonstrate the benefits of active involvement in the classroom activities. Second, inviting some of the silent learners to take part in classroom activities and giving them personalized suggestions and instructions about their performance, so that they can experience the benefits of such participation. Third, when some silent learners volunteer to participate in any activities, positively commenting on their performance and acknowledging whatever improvement they have made (no matter how tiny it may be), and providing detailed information on the things they need to improve further. In this way, after one term, two shy girls who were very poor at pronunciation started to volunteer to read aloud in public in every class session; one boy who had not wanted to pay attention to the activities in the classroom later became the first volunteer for almost every classroom demonstration.

The “rule” component may help teachers plan to systemize the compulsory participation of every student in classroom activities and public demonstrations, and to reward voluntary participation. As for the “community” component, teachers should realize the competitive relationship as well as supportive relationship between and among the members of the “community”. It is the teachers’ duty to balance the distribution of
limited resources (time, teachers’ attention, etc.) among the community members and to ensure that all the students have an equal opportunity to have their voice heard. In the “division of labor” component, teachers can further stimulate the students’ active agency and sense of ownership of the teaching and learning process by allowing them more power in the decision-making process. Such decisions include not only the procedural decisions about what activities the students like to do, but also for how long they do them or in what order and also the materials used for practice both in and out of the classroom. The decisions about the types of activities and the materials for teaching are also part of the “mediating artefacts” component. With the guiding principle of maximally stimulating students’ active agency in the teaching and learning process, teachers are able to make decisions about their use of suitable “mediating artefacts” accordingly. It seems evident that such an exploration of the components in the AS model as described above helps teachers in the planned aspects of lessons, as well as the dynamic moment to moment decision-making in the classroom.

In short, the AS model is a conceptual framework that can help us (teachers and researchers alike) analyse and reflect on our current or past practice, so as to indicate the direction for future practice. Such a framework will be very useful in the cycle of “teaching practice—reflection—further teaching practice—further reflection”. For novice teachers, this cycle may well start from the stage of “reflection” on other teachers’ practice at the starting point of their teaching career.

5. Direction of Further Research

The analysis so far has only illustrated one aspect of the usefulness of the AS. Another strength of AT is that the activity is analysed from two perspectives in the AS. As Engeström puts it,

An Activity System as a unit of analysis calls for complementarity of the system view and the subject’s view. The analyst constructs the activity system as if looking at it from above. At the same time, the analyst must select a subject, a member (or better yet, multiple different members) of the local activity, through whose eyes and interpretations the activity is constructed. This dialectic between the systemic and subjective-partisan views brings the researcher into a dialogical relationship with the local activity under investigation. The study of an activity system becomes a collective, multivoiced construction of its past, present, and future zones of proximal development. (Engeström, 1987, cited in Engeström & Miettinen, 1999: 10)

In other words, the AS model enables a researcher to attend to the particulars of a local activity from the “subject” point of view—an insider’s view, as well as to keep a comprehensive picture of the related factors around the activity—an outsider’s view from above the whole system. By choosing different participants in the same activity as the “subject”, the researcher can also gain insight from different insider perspectives about the
same activity. This function of the AS, together with the two triangles proposed by Blackler et al. (2000) for the exploration of inter-relations between the components of the AS (see Section 2.1), may well provide us with further insights into classroom language teaching and learning.

Notes

1. Object in quotes (i.e., “object”) refers to the component of the AS, whereas object without quotes refers to object in the general sense. This also applies to other components of the AS.
2. For sound /n/, tongue tip should touch the upper teeth ridge; whereas for sound /ŋ/, tongue tip should not touch the upper teeth, and the whole tongue should be drawn backward. M1 didn’t let his tongue tip touch the upper teeth ridge for both sounds, thus confusing these two sounds.

References

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