A Study of EFL Classrooms as Activity Systems

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<Abstract>

As a pilot study, the researcher observed two EFL classrooms in South Korea to examine how communicative language teaching (CLT) was operationalized in public schools. For the macro-level analysis of the classroom, the study adopted activity theory whereas van Lier’s Interaction Type (1988) was used to examine the classroom discourse at the micro-level. The results rendered that even though two participating teachers stated different objectives, their instructions were not much differently realized. The result from the classroom discourse manifests where the sameness came from in spite of their different goals of instructions, making the two teachers’ classrooms not very different from each others’ on the action level. By doing this, the study identifies some challenges for implementing CLT and suggests how these challenging findings can be used as resources for South Korean EFL teacher development.

key words: Communicative Language Teaching, Activity Theory, Diagram for Interaction Type, Classroom Discourse, Language Teacher Development

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1. Introduction

With the purpose of observing an initial implementation stage of communicative language teaching (CLT) in public schools after the government’s announcement of CLT as a main English language instructional approach, the present study looked into two middle school English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in South Korea. The primary focus was to inquire how some aspects of CLT, in particular meaning negotiation and teachers’ roles in classroom instruction, were being realized in the observed classrooms. As a lens to interpret the observed classrooms, this study applied activity theory (Leont’ev, 1978, 1981) and interaction type diagram (van Lier, 1988) as both theoretical and methodological framework.

II. Activity Theory and Three Levels of Human Activity

Activity theory (Leont’ev, 1978, 1981) has its roots in Vygotsky’s idea of human activity: all human activities are artifact-mediated and object-oriented (Vygotsky, 1978). Lantolf (2000) confirms the relation between activity theory and Vygotsky’s idea by stating activity theory "addresses the implication of his(Vygotsky) claim that human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity." (P. 8, italics are added). Highlighting two important features of human activities, furthermore, Nardi mentions that the primary goal of activity theory is to examine how human consciousness and activity are united in various human activity systems (Ryder, 2008). That is, by looking into human activities from the activity theoretic perspectives, it is possible to understand how human activities are shaped and reshaped in certain social and cultural settings. In this sense, activity theory is not one to predict future, but rather it focuses on describing the current phenomena, or human
activities (Nardi in Ryder, 2008)

"What is the individual or group doing in a particular setting?" is the essential question that activity theory has raised (Lantolf and Appel, 1994, p. 17). In order to answer this question, it is needed to understand three levels of human activities Leont’ev proposed. The first level is called activity level which can be also understood as a motive. This is the most original driving force for a human activity. Once a motive is set up, a person should think of what s/he will do in order to satisfy the motive. This is the second level of the human activity, which is called action. Action is also called as a goal with which a person can attain his motive. Lastly, there is operation or condition at the level of which the goal (action) is realized specifically in actual contexts (Engeström, Miettinen, and Punamaki, 1999; Lantolf and Appel, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). Thus, through the examination of human activities from these levels, it is possible to understand how motives (consciousness) can make the human activities different although they look same on the surface level.

For instance, whereas a person is hungry (motive), wants to cook a dish (goal), and thus reads a cookbook (operation), the other person wants to please her husband (motive) by cooking a delicious dish (goal), and thus she is reading the same cook book (operation). The two reading activities seem identical, but from the activity theoretic perspective, they are not in that two people are reading the same cookbook from different motives. However, the distinction among motives, goals, and conditions is neither simple nor clear. Sometimes, the components are regarded differently in different contexts. For instance, in a different context, reading a cookbook can be action whereas how a person reads in (i.e. scanning) is regarded as operation.

Leont’ev(1981) discusses this inseparable relationship by saying, "human activity exists only in the form of action or a chain of action. If we mentally tried to abstract actions from the activity that they translate into reality, nothing would remain. In the similar vein, Kozulin (1996) also mentioned, "when a concrete process—external or internal—unfolds before us, from the point of view of its motive, it is human activity, but in terms of subordination to a goal, it is an action or a chain of actions" (p.28). This discussion tells us the impracticality of identifying a motive and thus some justifications for focusing on action and operation levels in the activity theoretic perspective research.
Later, Engeström (1987, 1993, 1999) expanded the traditional triangle model of human activity (Leont’ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978) by including three notions – rules, community, and division of labor as seen in Figure 1. What he proposes in his expanded model of activity system structure is that a human activity is not isolated but rather an independent system that can only be understood when all the components of the human activity system are looked simultaneously. Therefore, Engeström (1987, 1993, 1999) argues that collective activity system should be the unit of analysis.

![Figure 1] Model of Human Activity System (Engeström, 1987)*

III. Discourse in Human Activity: Interaction Type

The needs for including discourse in an activity theoretic study have been increased in that discourses let us understand the bottom level of an human activity system (Engeström, 1993). Complying with the needs for a complementary tool for micro-level examination of an activity system, the current study adopted van Lier’s(1988) interaction type as a means to examine the discourse type of interaction and language use in the observed classrooms. Van Lier (1988) combined the activity theoretic perspectives with Goffman’s notion of frame to create the types of interactional orientations, or topic versus

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* Please, refer to Engeström (1987) for a comprehensive explanation of each component of a human activity system.
activity as seen in Figure 2.

![Diagram](image)

[Figure 2] Diagram for Interaction Type (van Lier, 1988, p.156)

'Talking' means that an interaction is neither topic-oriented nor activity-oriented. Small talk is an example of this kind of interaction. 'Telling' is more topic-oriented but less activity-oriented interaction type. Most announcements, instructions, and lectures belong to this category. Thirdly, 'instructing' interactions include the ones such as interviews, elicitations, reports, and debates. In other words, instruction is "some information needs to be transmitted, and this transmission needs to proceed along specific lines, following certain rules." (ibid. p.155). Finally, repetition drills, substitution drills, pair work, and role talking which require strict obedience of rules belong to 'drilling'.

These types of interaction allow us to know that different type of language learning classroom "leads to different right and duties of participants, and consequently to different kinds of contributions to the interaction" (p. 156-157). In a similar vein, the interaction type–based analysis of classroom discourse is expected to provide a picture of CLT implementation at the very local level. That is, by examining the interaction types derived from the classroom discourse, it is possible to identify the teachers’ and students’ roles in the classrooms, the focused aspects of communicative competence, and further their unique meanings in observed instructional context.
IV. The Study

Data for this study was collected from two middle school English learning classrooms in two South Korean cities. The eight grade English language classes in two different schools were observed. Both classes were using the same textbook and covering the same chapter at the time of observation.

Participant teachers are both females. One teacher -Teacher Park- was teaching the female class and the other teacher - Teacher Myung- was teaching male classes. Teacher Park had been teaching English for about 17 years and had participated in several teacher training programs including a month long intensive teacher training programs in Canada. On the other hand, Teacher Myung admitted that, during her 7 year teaching career, she had rarely attended teacher training programs.

The researcher videotaped and audiotaped both classes for two weeks, collecting five class periods from each teacher. The collected classroom data were transcribed in verbatim by the researcher and analyzed later. A written format interview with two participant teachers was also conducted to understand how the teachers perceive the communicative approach and their general classroom instructions.

As for data analysis, first, the macro-structures of each class were examined and presented according to the three levels of human activity (Lantolf, 2000; Leont’ev, 1978)*. As a follow-up micro-analysis, classroom discourses in each class were explored in order to uncover the emerged question regarding the way how a very different action are realized through the same operation.

1. The Result from Macro-Level Analysis

As a result of classroom observation and informal interview with teachers, the overall structures of the two classrooms were depicted and described according to the six

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* Agreeing with Leont’ev and Kozulin that it is extremely difficult and complex to identify a motive, this paper mainly focused on action and operation level.
components of the human activity system model (Engeström, 1987; see Figure 1). The observations of the participating teachers’ classrooms rendered the following summary of the two classroom activity systems. Table 1 shows that each component of two classrooms as instructional activity systems is very similar except each teacher’s instructional objectives. Given that the goals of the activity systems are different, however, it is possible to contend that these activity systems are different from each other (Hansan, in Ryder, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&lt;Table 1&gt; Macro-Structures of Two Teachers’ Instructional Contexts</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subject</strong></td>
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<td>(Stated) Objects</td>
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1) Differences at Action Level
First, Teacher Park mentions that the ultimate goal of her instruction is to assist her students to be aware of the importance of the English language as a lingua franca, to
perform simple English conversation when they meet English speakers as well as to understand information in English. Given that the pragmatic aspects of language learning emerged as a significant part of her instructional goals, Teacher Park’s objective was similar to what CLT advocates as ultimate goal of language instruction.

On the other hand, Teacher Myung clearly states that she is preparing her male students for their successful performances on school exams and trying to gear her classroom instruction into that goal (interview). She believes that in South Korea which is a very exam-oriented community, nothing else can motivate her students to learn the English language. Given that she had a clear and strong instructional goal, Teacher Myung was not sensitive to the social demands for developing students’ communicative competence relevant to the improvement of students’ practical abilities to communicate in English.

2) Sameness at Operation Level

Contrary to the differences in their stated goals, however, the ways each teacher achieved their instructional goals at the operation level were very similar. A prominent difference between two teachers’ instruction at the operational level was that whereas Teacher Park sometimes tried to communicate in English with her students, Teacher Myung never spoke in English except when reading English texts in the textbook or on a handout.

More specifically, both teachers’ instructions were constructed around the contents of the textbook, placing the textbook as a main mediating artifact in their instructions. The handouts each teacher prepared were also relevant to the contents of the textbook. The focuses of the instructions includes vocabulary, language structure, and reading comprehension. In terms of instructional methods, students in both classes were frequently asked to repeat English words, sentences, and phrases, indicating that repetition drill is another mediating artifact in these classroom activity systems*.

In this traditional language classroom, the division of labor also cannot be significantly different from each other. That is, teachers mainly initiated questions or an activity,

* However, this study did not deal with the issue how teachers measure their students’ achievements in relation to their instructional objectives.
students responded, and the teachers evaluated students’ responding performance, a typical IRE pattern commonly observed in a traditional language instruction. There were few students’ initiations of questions observed and most of students’ answers were performed in unison.

Considering Teacher Myung’s instructional goal—preparing students for paper and pencil school exams—, how she constructed her classroom instruction is not surprising at all. To Teacher Myung, teaching what would be the potential testing items is more needed than doing communicative activities. Therefore, as long as the exams are designed to measure students’ discrete knowledge of English in terms of grammar, vocabulary, or translation, Teacher Myung would not perceive any needs to change her own classroom instructions.

However, Teacher Park’s case is noteworthy in that whereas her stated goals align with what CLT advocates, her instruction does not reflect what CLT proposes regarding how to construct CLT-based language teaching classes. Institutional constraints such as school exams or a textbook design can be mentioned as the factors that shape her class more or less traditional language class. However, it is still needed to carefully look into what is going on in her classroom because a closer observation could provide a different picture overlooked at the macro-level analysis. This is the rationale to examine Teacher Park’s classroom discourse using van Lier’s diagram for interaction type in this study, and the study now moves to the result of micro-level analysis.

2. The Result from Micro-Level Analysis

The study examined how meaning building activities are constructed through both participating teachers’ classroom discourse. Given that macro-level analysis revealed a noticeable contradictions between Teacher Park’s instructional goals and her daily instruction from CLT perspective, however, the primary focus of micro-level analysis was centered on classroom discourse in Teacher Park’s instruction. Two classroom discourse excerpts are presented in this paper, and the focus of the examination is how the classroom discourse constructed and what it means regarding the tenets of CLT.

The first episode shows the typical English interaction patterns found in Teacher
Park’s class. That is, English conversation is sometimes initiated by the teacher but it is not sustained long. In the first episode, the class is checking the meanings of new vocabulary in the chapter they just started. Teacher Park initiates English conversation about popular TV programs while the class studies the word, ‘program’ (line 3).

Episode 1)*
1  TP: eeten e cinhayngswunseul malhapnita. >ilkeposca< program
   *(program) means the orders (of some events). Let’s read program
2  Ss: (In unison)/program
3---> TP: What program do you like on TV?
4  Ss: e: [i]:
5  S: (wangcho
   boss
6  TP: wangcho
   boss
7  Ss: (laugh))
8  Some Ss: thoma(tho
   tomato
9  S: (tomatho
   *(Students speak out their favorite programs))
14  TP: my– my son like– my son likes wangcho
15  Ss: wua
   Wow
   *(0:2 Students keep making inaudible responses))
17---> TP: So, wangchoka encey hatela?
   So, when is Boss on the air?
18  Ss: Welvoil hwacynbal
   Monday and Tuesday
19  S: MBC
   at MBC
20  TP: Kukemolumenyen papoka toynuncwul alko yelsimhi hakoisssta ako. ca. Program
   *(You watch it hard, thinking that you would be a food if you don’t watch. Okay program
21  Ss: *(Chorally and louderly)/Program
22  --> TP: My favorite program is?
23---> (Many students speak out the titles of various TV programs)
24---> T: Cal muolukeysssta. Ca kutauney ilkepoca. Page
   I don’t know well. Okay. Let’s read the next (one). Page
   *(The class keeps checking the meanings of the new words))

Even though Teacher Park initiates English conversation, and it draws some students’

* Yale Romanization System was used to alphabetize Koreans, followed by English translation in italics. The utterance originally produced in English is not italicized. 'TP' means 'Teacher Park,' whereas 'S' means 'a student,' 'Ss' indicates 'students'; the utterance between 'less than' and 'more than' symbols (> <) means rushed talk; the number in (( )) indicates pauses and the utterances in (( )) describe actions or provide additional information; and [ ] means overlapped utterances.
authentic and meaningful responses, she switches her code into Korean in line 17, resulting in students’ Korean responses. In line 22, she re-initiates English interaction but ends up simply giving it up and moves to the next word on the vocabulary list.

The present classroom discourse lets us ponder over the possible reasons for the prevalence of this kind of interaction pattern in her class instruction. The teacher might need to manage class time by reducing the authentic interaction, feel the lack of her own English ability to maintain the on-going interaction, or think that it is not desirable to talk about TV programs during class hour*. Whatever the rationale behind the decision is, the students’ desires to maintain the conversations of their interests are disregarded, showing that the meaning negotiations in this classroom do not occur in a way of complying with the ones advocated in CLT, but rather occurs in a way of reflecting a teacher-controlled traditional language learning class.

The next episode shows another feature of meaning construction in this English learning classroom. Teacher Park’s class is doing communicative activities presented at the end of the chapter in the textbook. After checking out the meanings of words and sentences in the activities through repetition and translation as a whole class, Teacher Park now calls on a pair of students and asks them to translate what she says in Korean into English (line 1).

**Episode 2**

1  TP: onnul nalessia tewulikayo?

     will it be hot today?

     (0.2)

2  S1: Will it be hot today?

3  TP: will it be hot today?

4  S2: (inaudible response))

5  TP: It may be hot today. It may be hot today.

     (0.1)

6--> TP: kutauney onul pika olkkayo?

     Will it rain today?

7--> S3: Will it rain tomorrow?

* In this sense, a post-observation interviews are needed to clarify the teacher’s decision making and its origin. This is thus proposed as a suggestion for future research.
In line 6, Teacher Park calls on another pair of students and provides Korean utterance they are supposed to translate into English. Although the teacher actually says, "will it rain today?" in Korean(line 6), one of the students translates it into English, "will it rain tomorrow?," (line 7) which is the identical one in the textbook. This might be due to the fact either that the student might not pay attention to what the teacher says or that the student’s low proficiency makes her regulated by the sentence in the textbook, preventing her from listening to what her teacher says. Interestingly, Teacher Park also accepts it as a good performance providing positive feedback (line 9). That is, both the teacher and students are object-regulated in this learning classroom, implying that authentic meaning negotiations are not the interest of this community. Rather, the real activity the class members are involved seems to get the right answers consistent with the contents of the textbook.

When the activity is over, then, Teacher Park wraps up the activity by mentioning the real weather outside in line 25. While she is searching for the appropriate word, a students co-constructs the teacher’s incomplete utterances. However, Teacher Park does not accept it but finishes her sentence by using the word, ‘fine,’ which is basically same with the word the student articulates in line 26. By disregarding the student’s effort to co-construct the on-going English conversation, the teacher either consciously or subconsciously reveals the rule of interaction or division of labor in this classroom activity system; namely, the teacher has an authority over every discourse in the classroom, resulting in turning the classroom interaction away both from the interactions students might experience in the real world and from the meaning negotiation advocated in CLT.

* This discourse episode also reminds the needs for post-observation interviews for explorations of a teacher’s thinking and decision making.
In a similar vein, finally, when the overall discourse patterns in Teacher Park’s classroom instruction in addition to the two presented in this section were reviewed from van Leu’s diagram for interaction type, it turned out that most of the classroom discourses belong to either ‘drilling’ or ‘telling’ where most of interactions were controlled by teachers and students’ responses are performed in unison. Provided that students’ learning and their classroom participations can be interpreted differently in different cultures, ‘drilling’ and ‘telling’ can be connected to students’ learning in a certain educational culture*. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that all four types of interactions are required in the real world communication both in L1 and L2 in that they are genuine forms of human interaction. Therefore, as long as the CLT advocates pragmatic aspects of language learning and if a teacher is determined to achieve the stated goal of CLT through his or her language instruction, having students be exposed to four types of interaction in diverse contexts should be carefully considered.

V. Conclusion

The macro-level analysis revealed that the two teachers’ classroom activity systems were different at the action level due to the participant teachers’ different goals and made us predict Teacher Park’s class as one more communicatively oriented. However, the other components of two classroom activity systems uncovered that two classes were not so much different at the operation level. However, the following micro-analysis, as an effort to resolve the question of how the same operation is realized to achieve very different goals of instruction, did not successfully answer the question emerged from the macro-level analysis.

This study thus have several suggestions for the future research relevant to the current topic. First of all, it is necessary to have more diverse data collected as well as to conduct a longitudinal observation. The analysis of the current study is limited due to

* In the first episode, students’ oral participation in reciting the word, ‘program’ in line 21 became higher in terms of loudness of voice compared to the one in line 2. This can be legitimately regarded as learning in terms of students’ mastery of vocabulary.
the lack of data triangulation, placing it a noticeable drawback of this research. More diverse data collections and analyses are expected to enhance trustworthiness (Maxwell, 1996) of this research. Most of all, more diverse ways of data collection would help us to obtain real 'emic' perspectives in understanding teachers' instructions and contexts.

Provided that the findings of this study are the sign of the discrepancy between what the teacher believes and what CLT proposes regarding how to develop communicative competence, they simultaneously encourage a further investigation of the contextualized meanings of Teacher Park's goals of instruction. In-depth interviews and a longer observations will enable us to explore the their meanings and soicalhistorical natures. Furthermore, it would let us find the meanings of CLT in South Korean public school contexts.

Next, the scope of the current study is limited only to teachers' perspectives and actions, leaving the voices of another critical participants - students- of the activity system unknown. Understanding how students perceive their teachers' instructions as community members is required for a more comprehensive depiction of South Korean EFL classroom activity system. Therefore, future research is encouraged to include students' understanding and experience of their English classroom learning at schools.

In spite of the limitations mentioned above, the study is believed to expand the boundary of the activity theoretic perspectives into EFL classroom research. Few studies has adopted activity theory in deciphering EFL learning classrooms or describing the implementation of a language curricular change. By the same token, the adoption of interaction type in this study also provides an additional tool to see the classroom discourse. Namely, teachers can look at their own instruction at the discourse level using this diagram, suggesting its possibility as a reflective tool for language teachers' professional developments.
References


행위 체계로서의 두 영어 교실 연구

김은주

본 연구는 의사소통 중심 영어교육의 교육현장 적용 상황에 대한 예비연구의 일환으로 중학교 영어 선생님들의 수업을 관찰하였다. 거시 분석을 위하여 행위이론을 미시분석을 위하여 Van Lier(1988)의 상호작용 모델을 채택하였고, 수업 관찰과 교실 탐사, 그리고 깊은 연구 참여 교사들과의 인터뷰를 자료로 수집하였다. 자료 분석 결과 구체적 행동단계 (action level)에서는 다르게 나타난 참여 교사들의 교실 행위체계 (classroom activity system)가 실제 조작 단계 (operation level)에서는 거의 동일하게 형성되고 있는 것으로 분석되었다. 담화분석을 통하여 실제조작단계를 살펴본 결과 의사소통 중심 영어교육이 제안하는 의미 있는 의미교섭 (meaningful meaning negotiation)이나 촉진자 (facilitator)로서의 교사 역할은 나타나지 않았고 이것은 참가교사 한 분의 교실 행위체계에 대한 의문점을 증가시켰다. 이 의문점에 대한 해답을 찾는 연구를 다음 연구의 과제로 두면서 그를 위한 계획, 예비연구로서의 본 연구의 한계를 마지막으로 기술하였다.

핵심 단어: 행위이론, 상호작용 모델, 의사소통 교수법, 교실 담화, 영어 교사