

Inclusivity in an ESP Classroom: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Perspective

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Abstract

In today's globalised world, with universities becoming increasingly diverse, fostering inclusive learning environments is crucial for holistic education and intercultural understanding. This paper explores the implementation of a group project in an English for specific purposes (ESP) classroom designed to foster cultural inclusivity among tertiary-level learners from an engineering institute in India. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), this study examines how the activity encouraged learners to explore cultural identities, challenge and dismantle stereotypes, and embrace collaborative learning within the classroom context.

Keywords: Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), culture and diversity, inclusivity, higher education, ESP, collaborative learning

Introduction

Learners, after completing their school education and getting into a higher education institute, often experience the challenge of navigating the differences in classroom in relation to social, cultural, economic, linguistic, stereotypical and ideological environments. The initial period of their programme owing to such reasons can become overwhelming as they strive to integrate into a diverse cohort. The journey towards learning collaboratively with meaningful engagement in all subjects can seem challenging amidst these substantial differences. However, the 'English for Communication' course offered in the first semester for engineering students in many higher education institutes in India

emerges as a pivotal course. It aims to enable the students to use English effectively for their professional requirements, write academic English, and aid them in speaking English fluently and confidently. The course also aims to foster a holistic education and creates a space to start a dialogue on current issues, sustainable practices, and the importance of inclusivity, which are essential parts of education. Therefore, a creative group project on culture and diversity assigned to the first-year students of Mechanical Engineering at a premier engineering institute in India is used as an intervention to explore the potential of the course and such collaborative projects in fostering an inclusive learning environment where the learners delve into the societal evolution, cultural significance, and diversity, and challenging entrenched stereotypes. By using the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a theoretical framework, this paper analyses the processes and outcomes of the group project and attempts to give a detailed account of how the learners explored cultural identities, challenged and dismantled stereotypes, embraced collaborative learning, and improved their English language skills.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is an effective framework for examining the sociocultural dynamics of learning activities in specific situations. Developed from Lev Vygotsky's Activity Theory (1978), CHAT has been further developed by Engestrom (2001). Human activity, according to CHAT, is mediated by technologies, artefacts, and social interactions within cultural and historical contexts. The four principles of CHAT are:

1. **Mediating Artifacts:** Tools and symbols, or artefacts, influence how people engage with the environment and learn. Textbooks, technology, contexts, and even languages are artefacts in the classroom.
2. **Activity Systems:** Learning takes place in a network of interrelated "activity systems." These systems have subjects, objects, instruments and artefacts, norms and regulations, and a community with shared understanding.
3. **Contradictions and Transformations:** Activity systems' contradictions provide the basis for learning. These inconsistencies may be external (conflicting norms) or internal (cognitive dissonance). To

resolve contradictions, overcome inconsistencies, and accomplish their objectives, individuals and communities engage collaboratively in transformative acts leading to collective knowledge production.

4. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): Learning occurs most efficiently in the ZPD, which is the gap between what a person can accomplish on their own and what they can accomplish with assistance and direction from mentors or peers who are more knowledgeable. Through scaffolding learners within their ZPDs, collaborative learning activities promote individual and group progress.

Cultural-historical activity theory has been used by several researchers to examine collaborative learning techniques in English language teaching and learning (Goodnough, 2016; Solano-Campos et al., 2018). It can help sustain the ongoing development of more inclusive curricula in higher education. For instance, Dracup et al. (2018), in their study at an Australian university, affirmed that inclusive curriculum practices in higher education can be achieved through a collaborative, cultural-historical activity theory-based approach. Similarly, CHAT has also been used as an approach to understanding how emerging technologies mediate teaching and learning in education. Assertions have been made that emerging technologies as a mediating artefact through the perspective of CHAT potentially enhance student engagement and collaborative spaces (Batiibwe, 2019). Similarly, Hancock and Miller (2019) confirm that the CHAT framework helps examine reflection and action during inclusive education fieldwork, promoting critical thinking and reflective practices. However, addressing the culture shock experienced by diverse learners in an ESP classroom has not been explored in the Indian context. Therefore, this study uses CHAT to investigate how group activity serves as a cultural tool to mediate learners' perceptions of cultural diversity and foster collaborative inquiry and dialogue.

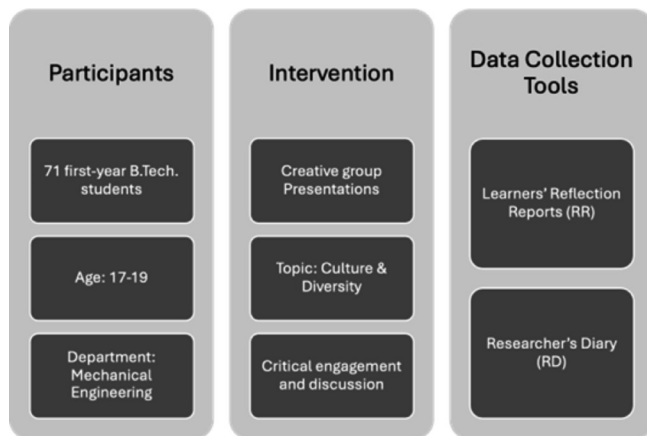
Research Questions

- How does the group project work as a mediating artefact for challenging stereotypes and understanding cultural diversity?
- How does the project position learners within their ZPDs for individual and collaborative learning about diverse cultures?

- How does the group project enable the learners to improve their English language skills?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative method with a sample size of 71 first-year BTech students from the Department of Mechanical Engineering, National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli, as participants. The participants belonged to the age group of 17-19 and were informed of the purpose of the study due to ethical considerations. They are coded as L1, L2, L3 and so on. All the learners had mixed proficiency levels, where many had good communication skills while some were struggling to speak. Their proficiency levels depended on factors such as language of instruction at school, exposure and opportunities to improve communication, and general willingness to socialise and communicate in English. For the intervention, the students were given a group project wherein they had to form groups of six based on similar cultural or geographical backgrounds. Each group had to make a creative presentation detailing the cultural histories of their respective places, which included insights into the roots, food, languages, festivals, architecture, people, and societal changes. Through the presentations, learners in groups shared personal narratives and cultural and historical perspectives on various traditions, fostering a deeper understanding of their cultural identities. The intervention/group presentations were also aimed at improving the English-speaking proficiency of the learner. The topic of the presentation was familiar to the learners, and therefore, their involvement with the presentation was comparatively higher despite their varying proficiency levels in English. Discussions on cultural stereotypes were facilitated after each presentation, which provided opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue, promoting intercultural awareness and challenging preconceived notions. After the completion of the project, the learners were asked to reflect on this episode of their coursework and share their perspectives on their takeaways and overall learning experience. The reflection reports submitted by the learners after the completion of the project and the researcher's diary documenting the major and important observations throughout the project and the presentations were used as data for further analyses.

Figure 1. Methodology Map

Findings

The findings show that the group project facilitated meaningful dialogue among learners, fostering a sense of community within the classroom. Learners expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their cultural identities and learn from their peers, highlighting the importance of inclusive learning spaces where multiple perspectives are acknowledged and valued. The researcher's diary and the reflection reports were analysed thematically and are presented below.

Cultural Identity Exploration, Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence

The collaborative group presentations allowed the learners to be active participants who brought to the discussion their social, historical, cultural and personal accounts, entangling the formal learning with the narratives from informal environments. According to Lev Vygotsky, learning is an active process as opposed to the passive transfer of knowledge, and the intervention enabled the participants to be active learners rather than mere listeners in the classroom. Similarly, social and psychological events are perceived as existing in the context of relations and interactions (Fenwick et al., 2011), which is also a part of the learning process. This was evident as the learners shared their personal experiences as they encountered differences in socio-cultural ideologies and identities.

Additionally, we are encouraged to pay attention to the connections between the formal learning environments of schools, colleges, and universities and the informal learning environments, as learning is always contextual (Taylor, 2014). Therefore, to foster a holistic education, especially in an engineering institute where importance is given to STEM subjects, it becomes highly crucial to incorporate projects that involve the sharing of experiences and perspectives from informal learning environments such as this through their 'English for Communication' course. This aids in laying a foundation for inclusivity concerning culture and diversity in the first year of their undergraduate programme. Such interactive activities would enable diverse learners across India to be aware of the cultural differences that exist in the classroom among their peers and also enhance their ability to face the 'culture shock' more sensibly. Below are the anecdotes shared by the learners after the completion of the group project, which support that CHAT "... has the power to deal with the complexity in educational systems" (Jaworski & Potari, 2009) and can expose potential areas for action and indirect relationships that might not be noticed otherwise (Daniels, 2004).

Simply said, it gave me greater knowledge about my native country. My peers' efforts are likewise really admirable. With students from all around India, the class is brimming with regional diversity. Additionally, interacting with others and getting to know them well are key components of being a student. We gained a better grasp of the cultural and emotional characteristics of people from different parts of India thanks to this activity. (L1, RR)

Being a Gujarati, I knew very little about the history of Tamil Nadu, its festivals, its languages, its common occupations, and many other things that I was able to learn from my classmates. (L12, RR)

I discovered that no culture is better than another. Every aspect of India is represented in our diverse class. This exercise made me realise that I should not judge my peers before considering their perspectives because, perhaps due to cultural differences, what I find amazing may not be exciting to them and their parents. (L23, RR)

Therefore, this group project acted as a catalyst or, rather, an artefact in facilitating cultural explorations and understanding diversity. CHAT as a theoretical framework enables us to understand such interventions as mediating artefacts in the activity system that probe learning and engagement among individuals.

Challenging Stereotypes and Fostering Inclusivity

The discussions that followed the group presentations incorporated self-reflection, analysing what they already knew and critically engaging with diverse perspectives. Such an engagement enabled the learners to question the preconceived notions formed about their peers based on their culture, geographical location, appearances, languages spoken, attire worn, etc. Through this group project, the learners were able to learn collaboratively through social participation rather than just focusing on knowledge acquisition. They were collectively able to discuss the cultural and social stereotypes that may hamper classroom engagement and overall learning experience in an educational setting. Wenger (1998) also asserts that learning is a process of social participation and not mere acquisition of knowledge and cognitive skills. Engagement in social practices through collaboration facilitates learning within a social context. This also motivates the learners and affects them in ways that enable them to respond to their environment with more awareness and sensibilities. Below are some of the learner reflections shared through reflection reports concerning stereotypes and inclusivity.

I may also discover the various viewpoints they may hold on a subject. Their differing viewpoints are also valuable since they enable me to think more broadly. The presentation helped me understand some of the misconceptions people have about my own state and culture. (L37, RR)

As a student, I find it beneficial since it allows me to engage with my peers and learn more about their backgrounds. I need to get better at handling sensitive topics with care. (L42, RR)

The most takeaway from this presentation was the immense diversity found in South India alone. Every state has its own divine culture and traditions, and not everyone is a Madrasi. Although there are many commonalities, there are also enough differences to set them apart from one another, which surprised me. (L17, RR)

Contradictions are a part of the activity system in this case, as the project has challenged already existing knowledge systems. According to CHAT, these contradictions are pivotal and provide the basis for learning to occur. Through this project, the individuals worked collaboratively in transforming acts that attempted to resolve prejudices and contradictions

and accomplish the objective, which is to foster an inclusive environment with an awareness of culture and diversity. Therefore, the reflections and classroom observations confirm what researchers argue- that engaging with multiple perspectives and interrogating assumptions and prejudices can contribute to teaching and learning with inclusive practices (Etscheidt et al., 2012; Yost et al., 2000).

Collaborative Learning and Community Building

The group project facilitated collaboration among the learners. It also facilitated the learners to bring in their individual experiences, ideologies, and life histories for critical engagement among their peers in the classroom. This project promoted community building as the learners developed a sense of togetherness despite all the differences and challenges in the classroom space. The learners share their reflections on collaborations below.

All things considered, creating this presentation was a fun experience that promoted teamwork and appreciation among all of us. (L8, RR)

I learned how to collaborate with others and overcome obstacles without compromising my relationships with co-workers. (L62, RR)

Critical Thinking

The intervention facilitated higher-order thinking skills as it enabled the learners to analyse the presentations and interactions, evaluate them through the lens of their already existing knowledge and experience, and create new meanings that are well-informed, objective and critically nuanced. The learners expressed the importance of this group project in enabling them to draw meaningful conclusions by operationalising critical thinking abilities.

Comparing and contrasting the cultures of various states allowed me to exercise critical thinking. This made it possible for me to find similarities and contrasts and make informed conclusions about how culture affects our societies and identities. Meeting deadlines, structuring my research, and developing a project plan all helped me acquire important project management skills. This experience will help with future professional and academic pursuits. (L10, RR)

English Language Skills Through ZPD

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) put forth by Vygotsky emphasises the significance of a learner's engagement with more knowledgeable others (MKO). ZPD refers to the gap between the learner's actual developmental level and the level of potential development that the learners could achieve through collaboration with MKOs or more competent peers (Vygotsky, 1978). However, studies argue that the potential development in collective activity can also progress when individuals collaborate with peers who are at the same level (Roth & Lee, 2007). Therefore, through this group project, the learners were collaborating with both MKOs (researcher and some peers) and with peers who are at the same level as them to achieve potential development in their learning process. The potential development was visible in terms of their cultural awareness, making meaningful conclusions after challenging the prejudices, their willingness to foster an inclusive learning space through such socio-cultural and historical learning engagements, and their improvement in their English language skills, especially speaking and listening skills. The learners improved their presentation skills as this collaborative group project allowed them to share their identities and cultures through creative expressions. For instance, some of them made posters, and some brought artwork that depicted their culture and explained it in class. Below are the learners' reflections, where they comment on the improvement in their English language skills.

This effort, in my opinion, achieved its goal of demonstrating that inclusivity can exist despite diversity. I can categorically state that this experience allowed me to expand my social circle and improve my general English proficiency. (L4, RR)

I believe that these kinds of events foster communication skills, open-mindedness, and team spirit. I hope to have more such events. (L20, RR)

The listening part has sparked a desire to listen intently the following time in order to learn and comprehend what others have to say so that we can debate rationally. (L49, RR)

The group project emerges as a useful and important pedagogical tool for fostering inclusive learning environments where the learners feel empowered to engage in meaningful dialogue with their peers and

express their diverse cultural identities. In order to maintain an inclusive learning environment in tertiary education settings that celebrates variety and fosters social cohesion, ongoing efforts to integrate culturally responsive teaching approaches and frameworks such as CHAT are important.

Conclusion

The application of the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory enabled us to account for the complex relationship that exists between identity creation, cultural diversity, and collaborative learning in a higher educational setting. By highlighting the significance of sociocultural interactions in influencing learning processes, the group project adhered to the principles of CHAT and functioned as a cultural tool for mediating learners' exploration of cultural identity and challenging preconceived stereotypes. This also asserts that learning can be structured effectively around heterogeneous learners in a classroom (Miettinen & Peisa, 2002) by incorporating social, historical, and material relations (Fenwick et al., 2011). The group project helped learners develop critical thinking abilities and intercultural competency by encouraging collaborative research and dialogue, which equipped them to engage critically in a diverse global community.

The study emphasises the essentiality of integrating socio-cultural and historical perspectives into educational practices to facilitate cultural inclusivity and intercultural understanding. Through the perspective of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, the group project emerged as an effective pedagogical tool, empowering learners to express their cultural identities and engage in meaningful dialogue with their peers, creating inclusive learning environments. The study highlights the transformative potential of projects that involve collaborative learning, which also improves the public speaking, presentation skills and listening skills of the learners.

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