Critical Review:

A Strategy for SNS-based Writing Practice to Leverage Less Proficient Students' Participation and Pedagogical Performance. Lee, Kwang-Soon & Kim, Bong-Gyu(2014)

Lee, Seorah*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold; first, to review the research paper entitled "A Strategy for SNS-based Writing Practice to Leverage Less Proficient Students' Participation and Pedagogical Performance" written by Lee Kwang-Soon and Kim Bong-Gyu in 2014 and second, to suggest an appropriate theoretical framework for the research paper. In this paper, I start with reviewing the research by presenting the implications and limitations. The second part criticizes the theoretical background of the research and proposes to use Activity Theory as a suitable framework. With the application of the activity system to the research, the current critical review shows how useful Activity Theory in explaining the students' mobile activities and analyzing the research findings.

* Ph.D. Candidate, Dankook University, leesurah@gmail.com

Ⅰ. Introduction

The purpose of this current paper is to critically review the research paper which explores the influence of mobile-based input strategies on lower level students' participation and performance in writing class and to supplement the theoretical background of the research by suggesting a useful analytic framework. The research paper demonstrated a pedagogical learning model to provide students with various input strategies through SNS and investigate student activities in terms of engagement and participation by analyzing survey results. However, there is a lack of theoretical background to explain the instructional learning model and analyze students' activities and research findings. Therefore, Vygotskian Activity Theory will be brought in an effort to further improve the theoretical foundation for the research. AT perspective will enable the research not just to introduce an appropriate framework to analyze students' SNS- based activity but also to construe the relations between elements of activities in the context of the sociocultural aspect.

Ⅱ. Paper Review

The main goal of the study was to investigate the influence of

teacher's input strategies through SNS on less proficient students' participation in writing class. The theoretical background of the study was based on input strategies such as scaffolding and Active Teaching and Learning Strategy. Scaffolding defined by Vygotsky means the conditions where a more knowledgeable person assists a less capable person to complete a task which might be a little beyond his or her ability. The researchers argued that appropriately leveled scaffolding with mobile technology is considered essential in an attempt to provide learning environment for successful engagement of students with less confidence in writing. Active Teaching and Learning Strategy as a main approach of the research was used to describe how the researchers apply their strategies to their own instructional model. The instruction model with ATLS features was developed by the researchers and was used to improve less proficient students' writing competence through KakaoTalk.

62 University students in the category of TOEIC beginner participated in the study for one semester. The teacher created eight group chat rooms on KakaoTalk. KakaoTalk, the most popular messaging application in Korea, was used to motivate students' writing activities outside of class. In class, students were given specific grammar templates, vocabulary listing, supplementary reading materials with PowerPoint or visual aids such as YouTube and then a writing topic was distributed to students. Those various materials were used to extend the background knowledge of a given topic and facilitate writing activities and some materials were prefabricated and reconstructed to the students' level. After class, the teacher left a topic-related question on

KakaoTalk and the students were encouraged to leave their opinions or sentences based on the grammar templates suggested by the teacher. For example, students were encouraged to use 'verb+ing' on KakaoTalk outside of class after learning a grammar pattern 'gerund' with a supplementary reading material in the classroom.

The study employs a mixed method approach adopting qualitative and quantitative analyses (5-likert scale). The results show that the teacher's careful scaffolding instruction is used to enhance learners' participation by providing selected input and linguistic support. 62% of the students agree with the efficacy of class materials such as audio and visual aids (Input Strategy). 53.3% of students show positive engagement of SNS-based writing activity (Engagement). 61.3% of the students indicate that the activities are useful to build personal intimacy and interest for continual participation (Participation). The data reveal that controlled input and guided support with scaffolding technique by the teacher was considered to be useful for learners and the close interrelation between SNS-based writing activity and the change of learners' writing strategy in terms of conducting writing tasks.

The implication of the research paper lies in two aspects: the researcher attempts 1) to design an instructional model and 2) to formulate input strategies with various reconstructed materials by using audio and visual aids. The orientation of these attempts was to maximize engagement of the lower level students and enhance their participation. In an effort to establish intimacy between students, the teacher was attentive to details such as creating cartoon images with students' names on them. The

statistical data also show that students have positive reaction to those teachers' strategies.

However, there are some issues that need to be reviewed. First, the theoretical background for the paper is inadequate. The background information merely describes some fragmentary concepts of input strategies by roughly referring to Active Teaching and Learning Strategy (ATLS). The instructional model employed to writing activities is mainly influenced by ATLS but only specific features of ATLS are listed without mentioning a clear definition or in-dept discussion of ATLS. Second, as a SNS based learning study, features of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) are not described at some length and characteristics of writing are also missing in the research. Since one of the major issues is involved in writing, adding nature of writing and prior studies pertaining to writing activities into the research paper is more likely to deliver reliability and support the writer's instructional manual. For another minor comment, the level of 'less proficient student (LPS)' was not properly evaluated and it seems that the criteria set to place the subjects under the name of LPSs is mainly from the fact that they belong to the beginner level of TOEIC which deals with listening and reading comprehension. Since the study explores writing activities by quantitative analyses, credibility of research results requires pre-writing test with a reliable assessment tool which would add weight to the subject's writing level and research results.

Among the reviewed issues above, the next part of this current paper is aimed at the theoretical background of the research. In an attempt to complement the theoretical background, applying

Activity Theory to the research foundation is suggested. After explaining Activity Theory briefly, Activity system, an analytic tool deriving from Activity Theory will be created to analyze mobile activities and research findings for the research.

Ⅲ. Suggestion: Application of Activity Theory

1. Brief Overview of Activity Theory

Sociocultural theory has gained increasing popularity and contributed considerably to the social aspects of second language acquisition since the early 1990s. It maintains that human mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process that is organized by cultural artefacts, activities and concepts. As a part of sociocultural theory, Activity Theory (AT) offers a descriptive and analytic framework which provide certain affordances that align with late-modern emphases on dynamic and contingent activity (Lantolf, J. P. & Thorne, S. L., 2006).

The origin of activity theory is traced from sociocultural phycology founded by Vygotsky. Vygotsky's idea of mediation is a key to the sociocultural approach. According to Vygotsky (Lantolf, J. P. & Thorne, S. L., 2006), all human activity is mediated by tools and signs which refers to technical tools or tools (e.g., a saw) and psychological tools or signs (e.g., language). The mediation can take form of the text book, visual material, classroom discourse patterns, opportunities for second language interaction,

type of direct instruction, or various type of teacher assistance (Donato & MacCormick,1994).

The concept of mediation was developed by Leont'ev into AT in which the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding human cognition and behavior is not simply the person rather the activities that people carry out when assisted by tools (Mark Warschauer, 2005). Leont'ev produced a taxonomy of activity types in an effort to enhance the analytic power of the theory and represent the hierarchy as follows:
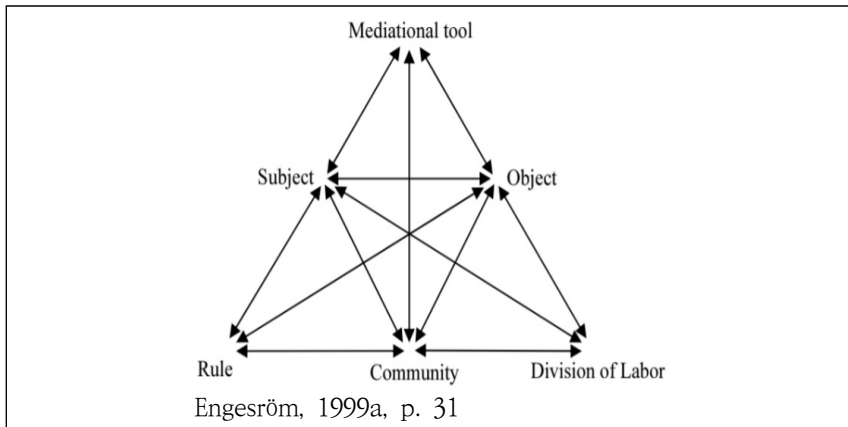
⟨Table 1⟩ Hierarchy of Activity

Active Theory unit of analysis	Oriented toward
Activity	Motive
Action	Goal
Operation	Condition

Realtered formulation from Lantolf, J. P. & Thorne, S. L., 2006.

According to Leont'ev, the analysis of activity can be undertaken at three different levels: activity, action, and operation. To illustrate these constituents of activity, the writing activity can be demonstrated as an example. Students as a subject are engaged in the writing activity. An object in the sense of goal is held by students and motivates their writing activity. To achieve the objective, actions are taken by students, and these actions are always goal-directed. Different actions may be taken to achieve the same goal, such as using a dictionary to choose vocabulary or copying phrases from reading contexts to improve writing

skills. On the contrary, different goals may be fulfilled by the same action. Students think that talking with foreign friends on SNS in English results in improved writing or speaking proficiency.

Later, Engestrom further developed AT by situating individuals' actions in collective activities, thus comprising three additional types of mediators: community, rules, and division of labor. In activity systems, all factors are interrelated and should be perceived holistically (Xiao Lei, 2008), as illustrated in Fig. 1.

Engesröm, 1999a, p. 31

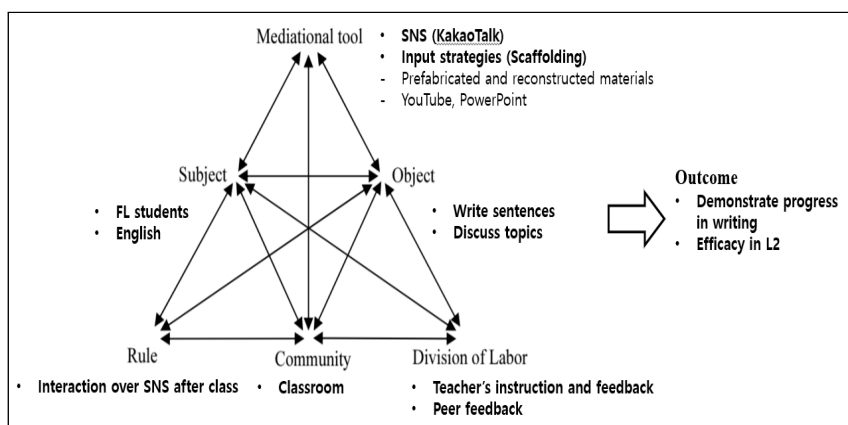[Figure 1] A Complex Model of an Activity System

A subject is the participant of an activity while an object is the focus of the subject's activity. Mediational tool links between the subject and object. Engestrom explains that the object refers to the "raw material" or "problem space" which is molded and transformed into outcome with the help of the physical and symbolic, external and internal tools (Lantolf, J.P. & Thorne, S.L., 2006). For example, in the writing activity again, the subject is a student, and the object is written texts. The students' actions may

be mediated by artifacts such as a language, KakaoTalk and strategic inputs. On the other hand, the community, rules, and division of labor constitute the societal and contextual dimensions of an activity. The activity occurs in a community in which divisions of labor exist. The division of labor within a community involves rules and regulational norms, each of which afford and constrain the goings on within a functional activity system (Lantolf, J. P. & Thorne, S. L., 2006). According to Engestrom, a subject's actions toward objects occur at the nexus of the three interrelated factors: the artifacts (tools and signs), the community and its understood rules, and the division of labor in these community-settings. However, since such a system does not exist in isolation, it is never stable and is comprised of parts that already exist in wider social and cultural contexts(Park, Ji-Hyun & Peter De Costa, 2015).

2. Application of Activity System

In order to demonstrate a description of the process of the research from the perspective of AT, it will be meaningful to explain more precisely how mediational tools are understood. As described above by Vygotsky, the mediation can be either material or symbolic. Useful mediational tools in L2 learning can be textbooks, reference books, pencils, computers, learning strategies, teachers, parents, and friends. These mediational tools include not only physical and mental artifacts, but also human resources, such as teachers or friends(Kim, Tae-Young & Kim,

Yoon-Kyoung, 2013). In the research paper reviewed, students as a subject participated in the activity and the object of the activity is to write sentences in English and, by extension, to discuss the given topics between students. Between a subject and an object, there are artifacts (symbolic signs and physical tools) mediated: Input strategies (scaffolding, selected and reconstructed materials with visual aids, YouTube) and SNS. Students' writing activities are strategically mediated by teachers' scaffolded input strategies and KakaoTalk. A rule directed to the subject (student) is to present opinions of the given topics in English over KakaoTalk. Community of the activity includes students and teachers in the classroom. In terms of division of labor, teachers as instructors have a role to provide instructions with a wide range of materials while the students' role is to produce writing on KakaoTalk in response to the instruction. Expected outcomes may be concerned with students' writing improvement and efficacy in L2. All these factors of activities are visually represented in Fig 2.

[Figure 2] Activity System of SNS-based writing activities

Examining the division of labor more closely in the activity system, at the beginning of the activity, a teacher is the only responsible laborer who provides a feedback to students and at a later time, students take ownership from a teacher to offer feedback one another on peers' questions. According to Lantolf and Genung's research (2002), the goals and motives catalyzing human activity are formed and reformed under specific historical material circumstances that include the division of labor and rules of interaction that structure a community of practice. In the writing activity, it can be interpreted that the teachers' input strategies through SNS play a critical role to mediate students' actions which result in promoting interactive participation, stimulating students' goals and motives and further transforming students' activity.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

In terms of mobile assisted language learning, the ultimate issue for both teacher and researcher would be how the tool supports meaningful language use and interpersonal engagement. The researcher of the current study makes an effort to navigate diverse input strategies to draw engagement and participation through a SNS tool. The statistical data also shows that students have positive response to those teachers' strategies. However, the research does not demonstrate a clear theoretical foundation and an analytical framework to describe those teachers' efforts. The current critical review attempts to share additional insights into

the analysis of activity by providing an explanatory framework for better understanding activities and the notions of the input strategies' role. The input strategies through SNS are considered to be a mediational tool and students' actions are mediated by the tool thus transforming students' activity over time.

The input strategies themselves can interact with one another in a dynamic manner. For further suggestions, the research can be taken into account how the input strategies mediated occurs at the micro level. At the same time, the strategies may not be free from the influences of rules, community, and division of labor. Within a lens of AT, it is not the individual elements of the system (subject, object, rules, community, etc.) that help analysts account for human functioning and development; rather, it is the relations between these elements that form the analysis and support intervention and transformation. These relationships are really process-operations and actions that occur in and across time periods. These relationships are often unstable, contentious, constantly negotiated and transformed (Lantolf, J.P. & Thorne, S.L., 2006). Therefore, it will be fruitful to explore multiple perspectives toward activity system. For example, researchers may examine a division of labor, rules or community, investigate if any contradictions exist between/within the elements and transform the activity as a result. For Vygotsky, the incorporation of tools or mediational means does not simply facilitate action but rather, alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions by being included in the process of behavior (Lantolf, J. P. & Thorne, S. L., 2006). It would be also worthwhile to look more closely at how writer's cognitive processes are influenced by social contexts.

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국문초록

논평 : 'SNS 기반 영어 쓰기 활동에 초급자의 참여와 성과 유도를 위한 학습 전략'에 대한 활동이론 적용 제안

이 서 라(단국대학교)

　본 논평은 'SNS를 통한 영어 쓰기 활동에 초급자의 참여와 교육적 성과를 유도하기 위한 학습 전략'에 대한 학술논문을 비평한 글이다. 해당 학술논문에서 교사는 초급 학생들의 글쓰기 참여도를 향상시키기 위해 수업 모형을 만들어 제시하였다. 교사는 다양한 시각적 자료를 제시해 학생들의 배경지식 및 영어쓰기에 필요한 전략을 학습시키고 카카오톡을 이용한 글쓰기 연습을 통해 그에 대한 인식 및 성과 활동을 분석하였으며, 분석 도구로 설문조사 후 리커트 척도를 이용하였다. 그러나 논문의 이론적 배경에 대한 설명이 모호하여 교사가 제시하는 전략을 뒷받침하고 학습활동에 대한 결과를 분석하기에 부족한 점이 있다. 따라서 본 논평에서는 이론적 배경의 미흡한 부분을 밝히고, 해당 연구에 적합한 이론적 틀을 제시할 것이다. 적절한 분석 도구로서 비고츠키(Vygostky)의 '활동이론(Activity Theory)'을 제안한다. '활동이론'은 학습활동을 주제로 하는 모든 연구의 유용한 분석 도구로, 본 논평에서는 '활동이론'의 '활동체계(Activity System)'를 적용한 예시를 보여줌으로써 해당 논문의 개선 방향을 제시할 것이다.

[주제어] 모바일 기반 영어 학습, 영어 글쓰기 활동, 비고츠키 활동이론