Cultural Historical Activity Theory: A Conceptual Framework for Analysing Post-Method Pedagogy

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To cite this paper:

Received: 21/01/2024; Accepted: 15/06/2024, Published: 30/07/2024

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Abstract

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) serves as an effective theoretical framework for analysing post-method pedagogy, providing valuable insights into the complexities of educational practices. This framework integrates social, cultural, and historical contexts, allowing for a comprehensive perspective that examines patterns influencing educational processes, cognitive development, and equitable education. At the heart of CHAT is the concept of expansive learning, which emphasises the continuous improvement and evolution of teaching methods over time. This approach advocates for adaptive and innovative practices that respond to the dynamic needs of learners and the ever-changing educational environment. By incorporating CHAT into post-method pedagogy, educators can significantly enhance their teaching practices, fostering more democratic, versatile, and effective methods that engage all students. This paper delves into the impact of CHAT on education, tracing the foundational narrative of its development through the contributions of three generations of influential scholars, from Lev Vygotsky to Yrjö Engeström. CHAT distinguishes itself by moving beyond mere rote cognitive accumulation, offering a conceptual toolkit for refining, and leveling pedagogical practices. Key elements of CHAT include the division of labour, which defines roles within the teaching and learning process, and mediating means, which involves the tools and resources utilised in learning. The central theme of expansive learning underscores the ongoing improvement of teaching methods, illustrating CHAT's practical application in English language instruction. By fostering inclusive learning environments, CHAT effectively addresses real challenges faced today in education. For educators seeking to strengthen their teaching methods, adopting CHAT offers a transformative pathway which is accessible to everyday teachers striving for positive change in their instructional practices. Integrating CHAT dynamics into teaching holds significant promise for those committed to continuous improvement in the field of education.
Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) stands as a profound socio-cultural framework for comprehending and revolutionising the dynamics of pedagogy and learning within the classroom milieu. CHAT, rooted in the seminal work of Vygotsky and subsequently expanded upon by scholars such as Leontiev (1978) and Engestrom (2001) underscores the significance of the socio-cultural context in the genesis and evolution of human activity, which, in turn, shows the processes of knowledge acquisition and skill development. This theoretical perspective prominently accents the mediating role of tools, artefacts, and symbols, thus elucidating their pivotal function in scaffolding human activity and fostering learning experiences.

This study provides a comprehensive overview of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), examining its historical development, successful applications in specific educational research areas, and a balanced assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. It explores the theoretical utility of CHAT for researchers and practitioners considering the adoption of this framework. Despite its potential, the limited use of CHAT in various studies suggests practical challenges in applying its concepts effectively. This limitation highlights the need for further research to investigate the potential benefits of CHAT in educational contexts (Nussbaumer, 2012). By addressing these challenges and generating
empirical evidence, researchers can enhance the theoretical foundations of CHAT and its relevance in fostering effective teaching practices.

Therefore, this study will undertake a comprehensive exploration of how Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) can be utilized as a conceptual lens for understanding and reshaping the dynamics of teaching and learning within the classroom. It will begin with a nuanced overview of CHAT, dissecting its core tenets, followed by an incisive examination of how this theory can be applied to analyze the complex landscape of pedagogical practices and learning experiences within educational institutions. The discussion will then advance to explore the transformative potential of CHAT in designing and implementing pedagogical strategies that not only enhance learning outcomes but also promote the critical ideals of social justice and equity, aligning with contemporary educational imperatives (Leont’ev, 1989).

2. Significance

In this context, this study makes a significant contribution to society by providing educators with a powerful tool—Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)—to better understand and address the diverse needs of their students. CHAT facilitates the creation of inclusive learning environments that celebrate cultural diversity and uphold the principles of social justice. Within the field of education, CHAT serves as a bridge between theory and practice, empowering teachers to refine their instructional methods based on a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural context. This ultimately enhances the quality of education for all students.

The article's emphasis on designing inclusive learning spaces aligns with societal values of diversity and equity, promoting a fair educational experience for every student and empowering them to effect positive change in their communities. The application of CHAT in English language teaching and the development of reading comprehension skills is particularly vital, as it ensures that language learning is tailored to individual strengths and weaknesses, thereby fostering better communication, and understanding in a multicultural society (Ho et al., 2024).

In essence, this study highlights the practical application of CHAT principles in the classroom, offering a valuable resource for educators, researchers, and policymakers. This focus has the potential to positively influence educational practices and outcomes, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

3. Overview of CHAT

The history of the theory spans three generations of interpretation, such as First generation: Vygotsky 1920's and 30’s—Individual -culture Second generation: Leont’ev (1978/1981)—Collective activity, meditational means, Division of labour as basic historical process Third generation: CHAT Engestrom, Cole—Dialogue and multiple perspectives, cultural diversity—Expansive learning (Nygard, 2010). CHAT is a comprehensive theoretical framework developed by Lev Vygotsky and his colleagues in
the early 20th century. It posits that human participation in activities is intricately influenced by a combination of tools, artifacts, and symbols. These meditational elements, which are crucial for comprehending human behaviour and cognition, do not function independently but are intricately intertwined within the intricate framework of social and cultural settings. It is within these contexts that the tools, artefacts, and symbols acquire multifaceted meanings, configurations, and functionalities, thereby exerting a profound influence on the way individuals employ them, navigate their environments, and interact with one another. In essence, CHAT underscores the inextricable fusion of human action with socio-cultural factors, elucidating the complex interplay between external influences and the internal dynamics of human activity. This theoretical framework, thus, affords a comprehensive lens through which to scrutinize the web of relationships between culture, tools, and human cognition, unravelling the profound implications for our comprehension of the intricacies inherent in human behaviour and learning (Taber, 2020).

CHAT underscores the paramount significance of the division of work within the web of human activities. According to this theoretical framework, any task or endeavour involves a fundamental division of roles. The subject, the active participant, strives to achieve a specific goal, represented by the object of the activity. Integral to this dynamic interplay are the tools and artefacts that are harnessed and manipulated by the subject to facilitate the achievement of said objective, while concurrently, the activity is guided and regulated by a set of normative principles and rules, which not only serve as a structuring mechanism but also contribute significantly to the socio-cultural context in which the activity unfolds. This multifaceted division of labour within the overarching framework of CHAT thus illuminates the complex interplay between human cognition; material tools, the teleological aspirations of individuals, and the socio-cultural milieu within which activities are embedded, offering valuable insights for research and analysis. Thus, the theoretical framework examines the connection between human activity and the wide network of participants and the institutional limitations that affect them (Bakhurst, 2009).

4. Key Concepts of CHAT

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), a framework to understand human development and learning, originated from the work of Lev Vygotsky and his colleagues. The theory has its roots in Vygotsky's "Subject, Object, & Mediating Artefact" the triad, which highlights the significance of circumstance and community in all types of education. It also considers how social groups and various activity systems mediate activity (El Maouch et al., 2024). It focuses on social and cultural aspects of activities, which are complex, goal-directed systems of actions involving tools, artefacts, and symbols. Actions, the basic units of activities, are mediated by tools and connected to specific goals, while operations are mental processes that individuals use to plan, organize, and execute actions. Mediation, a crucial concept, refers to the idea that human activity is shaped by various meditational means.
Internalization is the process through which external tools become incorporated (Dafermos, 2024). The social context of an activity, which includes the influence of social relationships, cultural norms, and practices, is essential in understanding how individual activities are shaped and how learning and development occur within a specific socio-cultural milieu. CHAT, often used in educational research, has been influential in fields like psychology, anthropology, and education (Davis & Francis, 2023).

4.1 CHAT: Can be used to Understand Teaching and Learning in Classroom

CHAT can be used to understand teaching and learning in the classroom by examining the classroom's activity system, which includes the subject (student), object (learning goal), tools and artefacts (textbooks, worksheets, computers, and other instructional materials), and rules (classroom procedures, expectations, and grading policies). By analyzing the activity system of the classroom, educators can gain a better understanding of how students learn and how to create more effective learning environments, as shown in Figure 1. For example, a teacher who wants to use CHAT to understand their students' learning might start by looking at the types of tools and artefacts that they are using in their classroom. If the teacher is using a lot of worksheets and textbooks, they might conclude that their students are learning in a more traditional way. However, if the teacher is using more interactive tools and artefacts, such as computers and simulations, they might conclude that their students are learning in a more constructivist way. The teacher could also look at the rules of their classroom to see how they are impacting student learning. If the teacher has very strict rules and expectations, they might conclude that their students are learning in a more authoritarian way. However, if the teacher has more flexible rules and allows students more autonomy, they might conclude that their students are learning in a more democratic way.

By understanding the activity system of their classroom, the teacher can identify areas where they can change their teaching practices to better support student learning. For example, if the teacher wants their students to learn in a more constructivist way, they might need to provide them with more opportunities for hands-on learning and exploration. CHAT can also be used to understand how students interact with each other and with the teacher in the classroom. For example, a teacher who wants to use CHAT to understand student interactions might start by observing the different groups of students in their classroom and how they work together. The teacher might also look at the types of conversations that students have with each other and with the teacher. By understanding the social dynamics of their classroom, the teacher can identify ways to create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment.
Figure 1. Types of tools and artefacts

For instance, if a teacher observes that a particular group of students is consistently excluded from classroom discussions, they may need to implement strategies to foster greater interaction among all students. Overall, CHAT can serve as a powerful tool for educators aiming to deepen their understanding of teaching and learning dynamics within the classroom. By analyzing the activity system and social dynamics present, educators can pinpoint areas where adjustments to their teaching practices could better support student learning.

Martin and Peim also highlight the academic significance of CHAT, specifically discussing the concept of "Academic Culture" and its impact on student success rates, practices, and activities, including group work and the awareness and acquisition of a second academic culture. They emphasize that activity theory focuses on object-orientedness, mediation, and the contradictions that may arise within students' activity systems and interactions (Martin & Peim, 2009).

4.2 CHAT: Can be used to Design and Implement Teaching Learning Activities

CHAT can be effectively utilized to design and implement teaching and learning activities that promote social values and inclusion. For instance, educators can employ CHAT to develop virtual learning environments accessible to all students, including those with disabilities and individuals from marginalized communities. This can involve integrating text-to-speech and speech-to-text functionalities, as well as providing
translation and transcription services. Additionally, virtual avatars representing a diverse array of cultures and backgrounds can be created to enhance inclusivity.

Another strategy involves using culturally relevant materials and teaching methods in a democratic manner. CHAT can support the creation and sharing of teaching resources that reflect the experiences and perspectives of students from diverse backgrounds, such as developing digital textbooks, videos, and multimedia content that resonate with their cultural contexts. This approach encourages the use of culturally responsive and inclusive teaching methods, fostering critical thinking and social action.

CHAT can also be leveraged to help students develop critical thinking skills and engage in social action. This can include facilitating discussions on social justice issues, developing research projects focused on these topics, and creating social justice campaigns. By empowering students to become agents of change in their communities, CHAT can connect learners with social justice activists and organizations through online workshops, webinars, and opportunities for volunteering and participating in campaigns.

Specific examples of how CHAT can be applied in the classroom include creating a virtual museum exhibit on the history of social justice movements, allowing students to explore at their own pace and learn about various efforts for social change throughout history. Teachers could also design simulations of social justice issues such as poverty or discrimination, enabling students to assume different roles and experience these challenges firsthand.

The concept of how objects hold meaning is crucial in this context. For children, objects can represent other things during play, such as a doll becoming a mother. In contrast, adults may understand symbols more abstractly, such as a cradle representing motherhood. This distinction highlights the importance of play in children's learning, where objects serve as tools for imaginative exploration rather than mere symbols. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, the significance of objects can transform, emphasizing the concept itself rather than the object.

Through these activities, students can develop empathy for others and gain insights into the challenges faced by marginalized communities. A teacher could create a virtual community where students from diverse backgrounds come together to share their experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of diversity and collaboration in creating a more just and equitable society.

In summary, CHAT is a powerful tool for promoting social justice and equity in education. By utilizing CHAT to create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments, teachers can empower students to become agents of change in their communities.

4.3 CHAT: A Comprehensive Socio-Cultural Framework

CHAT is a comprehensive socio-cultural framework that can be applied to the realm of English language teaching to analyze and refine classroom practices. By considering crucial questions such as goals, resources, norms and culture, activity organization, and
community building, instructors can use CHAT to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that fosters effective language acquisition, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Cultural historical activity enhances language learning

CHAT provides a valuable framework for English language teaching by helping instructors to consider the social and cultural contexts in which their students are situated, the goals of their lessons, the resources and tools that students need, the norms and values that influence language acquisition, the organization of learning activities, and the creation of a supportive community.

An illustrative example of applying CHAT to English language teaching is through the implementation of task-based learning. Task-based learning is an approach centered on the completion of practical, real-world tasks as a means of language acquisition. CHAT can guide educators in designing task-based activities that are tailored to students' interests and needs, providing opportunities for authentic language use. For instance, an English teacher might devise a task in which students collaborate in groups to research, plan, and deliver a presentation on a topic of their choice, using English as the medium of communication. This not only fosters language development but also hones research, presentation, and teamwork skills.

Drawing on the rich framework CHAT, a thoughtful teacher implements a multifaceted approach to nurture the reading comprehension skills of her English language learners (ELLs). Through a meticulously designed lesson plan, the teacher endeavours to foster the identification of main ideas and supporting details within texts, while simultaneously encouraging her students to adeptly draw inferences and make predictions, thus addressing their specific needs within the context of their linguistic development.

The teacher can extend her commitment to ELLs by cultivating a nurturing classroom environment that reverberates with inclusivity, welcoming students with a daily greeting and ensuring the accessibility of necessary materials. Her holistic approach also
champions the utilization of English among ELLs and promotes mutual support, thereby cultivating a positive and supportive learning milieu for all students. The teacher can design CHAT to tailor activities congruent with students' varied English proficiency levels offering differentiation through scaffolded writing assignments and flexible project options, thereby catering to each student's unique path to success. In essence, CHAT becomes an essential tool in the teacher's arsenal, enabling her to decipher ELLs individual strengths and weaknesses, thereby facilitating the development of personalized learning plans. It also aids in monitoring their progress over time, enabling the identification of areas necessitating additional support and timely intervention. In a comprehensive manner, CHAT empowers educators to continuously refine their pedagogical strategies, ultimately contributing to the success of ELLs not only within the educational realm but also in their broader life experiences (Engeström, 2001).

5. Examples of CHAT

In "Cultural Historical Activity Theory in Discourses on Learning in Education," Davis and Francis (2023) investigate the role of CHAT in English language learning. The authors illustrate how CHAT serves as a valuable framework for understanding the cultural and historical contexts of language acquisition and how it can enhance both language proficiency and cultural competence. They argue that CHAT emphasizes the significance of authentic language use, social interaction, and meaningful activities in language learning, highlighting the necessity for language instruction to be rooted in learners' cultural and historical experiences. The paper demonstrates that CHAT has important implications for language teaching pedagogy, enabling learners to develop a deeper understanding of language and culture, ultimately becoming more effective communicators in English.

Similarly, the article "The 'Creativity Crisis' as a Mind in Crisis: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Position" by El Maouch et al. (2024) explores the phenomenon known as the "creativity crisis" through the lens of CHAT. The authors contend that the decline in creativity, particularly in educational and professional settings, can be understood as a broader crisis of the mind influenced by cultural and historical factors. CHAT provides a framework for analyzing how societal changes impact individual creativity.

The study emphasises the interconnectedness of personal, cultural, and historical contexts in shaping creative capabilities, highlighting how modern educational systems and societal pressures may stifle creative development by prioritizing standardized testing and conformity over innovative thinking. The authors propose that addressing the creativity crisis requires systemic changes in educational practices, fostering environments that promote creative thinking and problem-solving. This involves rethinking the division of labor in educational settings, encouraging collaborative learning, and integrating tools and technologies that support creative expression. The study suggests that overcoming the creativity crisis necessitates a shift toward educational

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models that value and nurture creativity, supported by a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical contexts that influence it. This approach benefits individual learners and contributes to developing a more innovative and adaptable society.

Mikhail Dafermos' (2024) article, "Discussing the Concept of Crisis in Cultural-Historical Activity Research: A Dialectical Perspective," delves into the multifaceted nature of crises within the CHAT framework. He traces the historical and theoretical evolution of the concept of crisis, highlighting its application across disciplines such as law, medicine, and political economy. The article emphasizes the significance of the crisis concept in understanding social and historical changes, noting its pivotal role in explaining dramatic turning points in history, from Thucydides' analysis of the Peloponnesian War to Marx's critique of capitalist economic cycles.

Dafermos underscores that crises are not merely random occurrences but are deeply embedded in the contradictions and dynamics of social systems. He discusses the contemporary relevance of the crisis concept, particularly in the context of modernity and post-modernity by exploring how crises challenge the Enlightenment notion of continuous progress and suggest a more fragmented and dynamic understanding of historical development. The article advocates for a dialectical approach to crises, recognizing them as moments of profound transformation that open up possibilities for new forms of social organization and subjectivity. Dafermos presents a compelling argument for the importance of the crisis concept in cultural-historical research, emphasizing its role in driving social change and advancing theoretical understanding within the CHAT framework.

6. Applications of CHAT

CHAT has been effectively applied in the Finnish education system to encourage collaborative learning and problem-solving among students. Additionally, it has been utilized in various project-based learning environments and professional development contexts, particularly in enhancing teacher knowledge, instructional approaches, and student participation. Successful applications of CHAT are also evident in special education and technology coaching, where it assists in delivering customised teaching and learning experiences tailored to individual student learning profiles. By leveraging CHAT, educators can create more inclusive and engaging educational settings that address the diverse needs of all learners.

- Applying the CHAT principles in the educational context empowers teachers to establish a dynamic and inclusive classroom environment that fosters optimal learning experiences for all ELLs. CHAT, rooted in the work of Vygotsky and his sociocultural theory, offers a holistic framework for understanding the convoluted interplay between cultural, historical, and social factors in the learning process, providing educators with a comprehensive approach to address the diverse needs of ELLs.
By integrating CHAT principles, teachers can appreciate the significance of cultural diversity within the classroom, recognizing that ELLs bring a wealth of cultural knowledge and experiences that can be harnessed to enrich the learning environment. This recognition enables educators to celebrate and incorporate the diverse backgrounds of their students, thereby fostering an atmosphere of respect, validation, and cultural sensitivity.

CHAT encourages teachers to consider the historical and socio-cultural context in which ELLs exist, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the impact of socio-economic conditions, immigration experiences, and the educational backgrounds of ELLs. By acknowledging these factors, educators can tailor their instructional approaches to meet the specific needs and challenges that arise from these circumstances, ultimately promoting a more equitable learning environment.

Incorporating CHAT principles also prompts teachers to engage in collaborative and socially mediated learning experiences, as Vygotsky posited that learners acquire knowledge through interactions with peers and more knowledgeable others. For ELLs, this means that creating opportunities for peer collaboration, as well as interactions with teachers, is pivotal to their language development and overall learning.

To ensure effective learning for ELLs, it is imperative to employ a diverse range of teaching methods and materials, as these students come from varied backgrounds and possess distinct learning styles. By incorporating a multitude of instructional approaches, educators can cater to the diverse needs of their ELLs, thereby ensuring access to the curriculum.

CHAT emphasizes the importance of collaborative interactions among students as essential components of the learning process. English Language Learners (ELLs) can derive substantial benefits from engaging in collaborative tasks and activities, both in English and their native language, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Employing scaffolding as a pedagogical technique is equally pivotal; it involves teachers offering progressive support to students as they grapple with new concepts and skills, gradually diminishing this support as students become more adept. Providing constructive feedback on students' progress is crucial, enabling them to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and set goals for self-improvement. By integrating these CHAT principles into their teaching practices, educators can cultivate a classroom environment that optimally facilitates learning for all ELLs.

7. Conclusion

CHAT aims to understand and enhance classroom teaching and learning by emphasizing the crucial role of the socio-cultural environment in human activities, particularly in learning and skill development. It highlights the importance of tools, artifacts, and symbols in mediating human behavior and enriching learning experiences.

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CHAT posits that objects, technologies, and symbols embedded within social and cultural contexts facilitate human engagement in activities. These elements acquire complex meanings, configurations, and functions that influence how individuals interact with their surroundings and communicate with one another. By providing a comprehensive lens, CHAT allows for a deeper understanding of the interplay between human cognition, technology, and culture.

Furthermore, CHAT underscores the significance of the socio-cultural context in knowledge acquisition and skill development. It focuses on the idea that human engagement in activities is mediated by a constellation of tools, artefacts, and symbols interwoven within social and cultural frameworks. These components take on multifaceted meanings and functionalities, shaping how individuals navigate their environments and interact with each other. CHAT offers valuable insights for research and analysis, aiming to design and implement pedagogical strategies that enhance learning outcomes while promoting social justice and equity, in line with contemporary educational imperatives.

As a theoretical framework, CHAT explores the relationship between human activity and the network of participants and institutional constraints. It emphasizes the social and cultural dimensions of activities, which are complex, goal-directed systems involving tools, artifacts, and symbols. The theory highlights mediation, internalization, and the social context of activities, making it a significant tool in educational research. CHAT has influenced various fields, including psychology, anthropology, and education, providing a framework for understanding how people learn and collaborate within social and cultural contexts, particularly in classroom settings. It acts as a lens through which we can observe how individuals utilize tools, objects, and symbols to engage in learning.

CHAT asserts that learning is a collective endeavor, shaped by the rules and tools available within a group context. These tools can range from books and computers to the organization of the classroom itself. By illuminating how these factors influence learning, CHAT provides a framework for educators to create effective learning environments.

Applying CHAT principles in the classroom enables educators to cultivate a supportive learning atmosphere for all English Language Learners (ELLs) by embracing cultural diversity, considering historical and socio-cultural contexts, and promoting collaborative and socially mediated learning experiences. This approach not only aids ELLs in their language acquisition but also fosters a more inclusive and equitable educational setting, where each student's unique background is recognized and celebrated. In conclusion, CHAT serves as a robust framework for evaluating and enhancing English language teaching practices. By embracing the foundational elements of CHAT, educators can create dynamic, culturally sensitive, and effective learning environments that promote language acquisition, engagement, and overall educational success.
References


Acknowledgements
The authors gratefully acknowledge the Department of English at Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, India, for their support during this research.

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Divya Manoharan Sudha is a respected Research Scholar in the Department of English at Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education in India. With a profound dedication to education and research, Divya has made significant contributions to her field, particularly in educational theories and practices. Possessing advanced degrees in education, she has devoted her career to exploring innovative pedagogical frameworks that enrich teaching and learning experiences. At Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Divya is renowned for her dynamic teaching style and unwavering commitment to student success. She actively engages in research, focusing on contemporary educational challenges and their solutions. Divya frequently participates in conferences, workshops, and seminars, where she shares her insights and learns from fellow educators and researchers. Her publications in esteemed journals reflect her deep understanding of educational dynamics and her dedication to enhancing educational practices.

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Authors’ Contribution
Divya Manoharan Sudha contributed extensively to the project, focusing on conceptualization and methodology, drafting the article, and undertaking responsibilities for data curation, collection, formal analysis, and interpretation. On the other hand, Dr. Ramachandran Subramaniam Pillai played an important role in validating the findings, reviewing and editing the manuscript, and giving final approval for the version to be submitted.

Declaration of conflicting interest
The authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article.