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Comparing the Same Task in ESL vs. EFL Learning Contexts: An Activity Theory Perspective

Abstract

This classroom-based study examined the role of context in task-based interaction. Identical tasks were implemented in university-level classes in two contexts: Australian ESL (n = 27) and Chilean EFL (n = 19). The learners engaged in discussion tasks, as part of the regular classroom activities. Data included audio-recorded task-based interactions, observations, and a survey. Data analysis was guided by activity theory, examining how learners approached the tasks, including deliberations about language (actions), the group dynamics, and their use of mediating tools (e.g., L1). Our findings revealed differences in the learners' actions in these two contexts, both expected (e.g., use of L1) and unexpected (e.g., the nature of assistance provided). Our study shows that in different contexts, the same tasks represent different learning activities.

Keywords: task-based interaction; sociocultural theory; activity theory; teaching/learning context; ESL vs. EFL

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Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained much attention from educational programs around the world as communicative language teaching (CLT) has been replacing the traditional, grammar-based teaching. What distinguishes TBLT is the deployment of activities with a primary focus on meaning, providing learners with opportunities to use the target language for authentic purposes (Ellis, 2017).

The majority of studies on task-based interaction have focused on the impact of certain task variables, such as task complexity (e.g., Kim & Taguchi, 2015) on learners' task performance. Much of this research has been informed by cognitive theories of second language (L2) acquisition, and has been conducted in laboratory settings (see Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005), or in language classrooms where, as McDonough (2015) aptly describes it, the task is a "one-off research activity" (p. 227).

There is now, however, a growing realization that in authentic language classes task variables alone may not predict learners' task-based performance. In the classroom, it is learner-related factors that interact with task conditions and with the local and broader context which together determine the nature and outcome of learners' task performance. For example, a number of studies conducted by Storch and colleagues (e.g., Storch, 2004; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010) in an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) setting, using collaborative writing tasks, showed the importance of learners' goals and the dyadic relationships learners form on the nature of learners' attention to language use and language learning outcomes. With a quasi-experimental design in an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) setting, Sato's (2017) study

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showed that learners' dispositions towards the task and/or interlocutors in the group were related to their language learning outcomes.

In the current study, we were also interested in how learner and context-related factors interact to influence learners' task performance. While TBLT research has expanded its data collection sites to foreign language contexts in recent years (Butler & Zeng, 2015; García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2012) and reported contextual factors that may influence interaction patterns and L2 learning, research in which TBLT is comparatively examined in different teaching/learning contexts is scarce. Admittedly, each context may present unique factors influencing learners' task performance. However, we felt that comparing between different learning contexts may show more starkly the intricate relationship between task and context. In the study, we employed Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (SCT) and activity theory (AT) to capture learner and context-related factors when learners engage in tasks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SCT views all human cognitive development as inherently social. It focuses on the assistance offered to novices during interaction by expert members of the society (adults or more able peers) and the tools that mediate this assistance. One of the main claims of the theory is that not all forms of assistance lead to development (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Only assistance that is scaffolded (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976)—carefully attuned to the novice's current and potential stages of development—is effective. Research informed by SCT on task-based interaction has shown that successful scaffolding can also occur in small groups or pairs

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composed of L2 learners of similar L2 proficiency. In such groups learners can pool their linguistic resources, and construct a collective scaffold (Donato, 1994; Sato & Viveros, 2016; Storch, 2002). Collective scaffolding enables learners to perform beyond their existing capacity and to eventually internalise the knowledge co-constructed during the interaction. However, such scaffolding is more likely to occur when learners collaborate; that is, where they function as a collective (Storch, 2002). This research has thus highlighted two important dimensions of task-based interaction: the nature of the assistance and the relationships that learners form.

The tools that mediate assistance include material tools (e.g., textbooks) and symbolic tools (e.g., language). Research, and particularly the work of Swain and colleagues (e.g., Swain, 2006; 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 1998), has demonstrated how language functions as a tool to mediate the assistance that peers provide each other during task-based interaction. A number of studies have also shown that for L2 learners, the tool can be the learners' first language (L1) and the L2 (e.g., Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Storch & Aldosari, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). This research has been conducted predominantly with learners completing writing tasks or responding to written feedback.

SCT also views learners as active agents who have the capacity to establish goals and to choose the means to achieve their goals (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Roebuck, 2000). The theory that best encapsulates this notion of agency and which is derived from SCT is AT. Although AT has its roots in Vygotsky's (1978) work, it is predominantly Engeström's (2001) models that are used currently in educational research.

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The underlying premise of AT is that all human purposeful activity, such as learning, is motivated by needs or desires (*object*) and is directed towards achieving a desired *outcome*. This object gives sense to the actions or chain of actions that humans participating in the activity (*subjects*) undertake. The actions are deliberate, goal driven, and are mediated by tools. In Engeström's second generation (G_2) of AT, shown in Figure 1, these actions take place within the broader context (*community*) with norms of behaviour (*rules*) and power hierarchies (*division of labour*) regulating interaction within an activity system. It is this view of context that we adopted in our study.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

This model of activity is inherently dynamic. There are interactions between all the components of the activity system (depicted by double headed arrows in the figure) as well as potential tensions within and between the six components of the activity. Each of these components can facilitate or constrain actions within the activity system. Furthermore, the introduction of new elements (e.g., a new tool) can introduce new tensions with unpredictable outcomes. New tensions can destabilize and disrupt the existing activity system, leading to transformation and a reframing of the object (e.g., Blin & Munro, 2008), or alternatively to confusion and a disengagement from the activity.

When applied to research on task-based interaction, AT enables researchers to adopt an interpretive framework, where learners' behaviour such as the stance they adopt, how they proceed with the task, or what they choose to focus on during the interaction, is explained with

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reference to the subjects' goals and contextual factors. The results of early studies (e.g., Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Roebuck, 2000; Storch, 2002) on task-based interaction informed by AT challenged the assumption of a task as a fixed construct. These studies showed the fluid and unpredictable nature of learners' task behaviour, across- and within-learner data. Based on their findings, Coughlan and Duff (1994) argue for a distinction to be drawn between a task and an activity. A task is merely a 'behaviour blueprint' motivated by the teachers' or researchers' agenda; activity is what actually transpires when learners perform a task. Learners bring into the task their own unique goals, language learning histories, and importantly their perception of the task they are asked to complete. For example, in Coughlan and Duff's study, it was the learners' perception of the contrived nature of the experimental task that explained differences in task behaviour on different occasions. In Roebuck's (2000) study, the learners' needs to preserve their face when confronted with a difficult task explained how different learners went about completing the task.

More recent studies investigating task-based interaction using the lens of AT (e.g., Blin & Appel, 2011; Fujioka, 2014; Li, 2013; Li & Zhu, 2017) have provided additional confirming evidence of the importance of learner agency when explaining task-based behaviour. Some of these studies analysed the activity of individual learners composing academic texts (e.g., Fujioka, 2014; Li, 2013). These studies revealed the tensions between the participants (teachers, L2 students) arising in this writing activity; tensions which relate to differing expectations, histories, and goals, as well as the transformational outcomes of such tensions (Fujioka, 2014). Other

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studies investigated peer feedback activities (e.g., Jin & Zhu, 2010; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012), showing how the relationships learners form influence and transform the object of the activity and the actions that the learners take in completing the assigned tasks. However, and, as in the case of studies informed by SCT, most of these studies have focused on writing tasks. Furthermore, the focus of most of these studies has been on the learners' goals and tensions within the system, with relatively less attention given to how the context in which the activity takes place impacts on learner behaviour.

In our study, we used AT to analyse and explain learners' behaviour as they worked in small groups on oral tasks in authentic English language classrooms but in two distinct language contexts: in Australia, an ESL context, and in Chile, an EFL context. The overarching aim of our study was to investigate how such different language learning environments impact on learners' task behaviour. We focused on the bottom part of Figure 1, representing what Engeström (2008) refers to as 'the hidden curriculum': the implicit and explicit rules governing subjects' behaviour in their educational context, the community represented by the classroom (students, teacher), and the power hierarchies (division of labour). We considered the impact of these elements of the activity on the learners' behaviour (actions) and the goals that seemed to drive their actions as they completed the assigned task. Our intention was not to generalize the patterns observed in the current study to all ESL and EFL contexts. Rather, we aimed to explore interaction patterns specific to the two teaching/learning contexts, each of which shared features that are typically ascribed to ESL or EFL contexts. The research questions guiding our study were:

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RQ1. How do Australian ESL learners and Chilean EFL learners approach a communicative task?

RQ2. How does context affect interaction patterns among the learners in the two contexts?

METHODOLOGY

Context and Participants

We selected the two contexts because these were the contexts in which we teach and are thus very familiar to us, affording us an 'insider' perspective. The contexts share a number of similarities: in both contexts the participants were adult learners of English as an additional language enrolled in university degree courses with a major in Commerce. We received ethics clearance to conduct the research in the students' English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes that formed part of their degree course. The students were considered to be of intermediate to advanced proficiency in English in their educational contexts. We acknowledge, however, that an intermediate proficiency in a second language context may be considered advanced in a foreign language context.

Australia: An ESL Context. Australia presents a context where learners have plentiful opportunity to be exposed to the L2 and an authentic need to communicate in the L2 inside and outside the language classroom. ESL classes are usually composed of learners from diverse L1 backgrounds and thus the L2 (i.e., English) is the lingua franca that enables the learners to communicate with their peers and their language teacher. However, recent trends in international education show that a large proportion of the international students in Australia are from China

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and thus the majority of the students in the current study shared an L1 (Chinese)[1]. The study was conducted in a top-ranking public university. International students are accepted to study at the university only if they demonstrate a high threshold level of English proficiency (e.g., an IELTS score of 6.5 or an equivalent score on other recognized English language proficiency tests). Upon arrival, these students are encouraged (but not mandated) to undertake the university's diagnostic English language test, and based on the test results, may be advised to enroll in one of the EAP credit-bearing subjects offered by the university.

The study was conducted in an EAP subject entitled Academic English for Economics and Business. As the name suggests, the subject was a discipline-specific EAP subject. It used topics from macroeconomics to develop learners' academic language skills. The class met for four hours per week over 12 weeks. Data was collected in two parallel classes. The participants were 27 international students (20 females and seven males), predominantly of Chinese L1 background (19 out of 27). Their age range was 18-24.

Chile: An EFL Context. Chile conforms to socio-linguistic and socio-educational features widely reported in other EFL contexts: the linguistic environment where learners lack sufficient exposure to the target language (e.g., Spain: Muñoz, 2014); the language of instruction which is often the L1 of the learners (e.g., South Korea: Liu, Ahn, Baek, & Han, 2004); foreign language anxiety that hinders active participation in communicative activities (e.g., Taiwan: Hsu, 2015); and the low motivation deriving from the perception of a lack of necessity to learn the language

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or of a low language learning aptitude (e.g., Japan: Mercer & Ryan, 2010). The resulting developmental outcomes are often only in receptive skills (listening and reading) at best.

The participants in this context were 19 commerce majors (three females and 16 males) at a large private university in Santiago. Their ages ranged from 20 to 26. At the university, all commerce students were required to take a diagnostic test and those who were classified below B1 (the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR) were required to take the subject. The teacher was a Chilean who learned English in Chile. His English proficiency was, however, native-like and he conducted the classes primarily in English (but see the results section for his Spanish use).

The course was designed to help the students develop general English skills, as opposed to discipline specific skills, and reach B1 (CEFR) at the end of the year. The English classes at the university advocated communicative approaches. The class met twice a week for a period of 90 minutes each for 14 weeks. Table 1 summarizes the participant information.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Tasks

Identical tasks were designed and implemented in the Australian ESL and Chilean EFL contexts. Integrated into regular classes taught by the class teachers, the tasks were group discussion tasks. Discussion tasks were commonly used in the English classes in both contexts. However, the additional and novel requirements in this task were to reach consensus and present the group stance publicly. In this sense, the task was unfamiliar in both language learning

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contexts. The learners were asked to form groups of 3-5 students (self-selected), were given their topic (as a handout), and then given time to discuss the topic and select one member of the group to present the group's stance to the entire class. The individual presentation was brief (2-3 minutes). In the Australian context, the individual presentation was assessed formally and contributed 10% to the student's overall grade. Thus each week, a different group member presented. In the Chilean context, the grading was less formal. The students were informed that they would be awarded extra credits for participating in the group work and subsequent presentations.

The discussion topics and materials were carefully designed in order to encourage the learners to engage in meaningful communication. The topics chosen were related to the economy and some dealt with contentious topics such as 'the right to strike' and 'pension age.' These discussion questions and materials were slightly altered according to the two contexts. For instance, when the task asked students to predict future economic performance, the learners in the two contexts were provided with graphs depicting each country's economic growth and unemployment rates for the past 10 years.

Data Collection

A number of data collection tools were used in the larger study, but in this article, we focus on the data collected by three of these tools: (a) recording of task-based interaction; (b) classroom observation; and (c) a demographic survey.

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All group work was audio-recorded, which served as the main data source for the current study. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim. Research assistants translated L1 use in the Chilean data. The 27 Australian ESL students formed six groups (4-5 students in each group) and met weekly over the course of three weeks. Thus the total data set of the recorded group work in Australia was made up of 18 group recordings (6 groups × 3 sessions), totaling 536 minutes of recording. The amount of time groups spent on the task ranged from 29-33 minutes, averaging 31 minutes. The Chilean data was comprised of 13 group work distributed over two weeks, totaling 351 minutes of recording. Each group took 24-33 minutes to complete the task, averaging 27 minutes.

During the data collection period, informal observation notes were made after each session by the first author to supplement the recordings. The researcher recorded reflections on salient features of group behaviour in both contexts (e.g., whether the students seemed engaged in the task) as well as teacher-learner interactions (e.g., the amount and nature of assistance requested and provided).

Data Analysis

Our study utilized AT as an analytical framework. We focused in particular on the learners' actions during the activity and the mediating tools. The recorded and transcribed interactions made visible the learners' actions as the activity unfolded. These actions included discussion and negotiation about how to approach the task, including negotiations about topic and stance. The other salient action in the transcripts was deliberations about language use. The tools the learners

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utilized to mediate these actions included artifacts (handouts, online resources), symbolic tools (L1 and L2). What stood out in reading the transcripts, particularly the EFL transcripts, was the use of L1 as a mediating tool. The other mediating tool was one that Engeström (2001) refers to as 'social mediators' (peers in the group and teacher). These social mediators formed part of the community, a community with its own *rules*, both implicit (e.g., expectations, formality of teacher-student relations) and explicit (e.g., assessment criteria). As Oskoz and Elola (2014) note, the rules also govern the *division of labor* in the community, whether that division of labor is horizontal (i.e., expectations within groups as to individual contributions) and vertical (teacher-student). Figure 2 illustrates a model that we adapted from Engeström (2001) to analyze our data.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Transcribed interactions were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively for: (a) approach to the task; (b) attention to language form (L2); and (c) L1 use. The authors independently analysed all the transcripts of the task-based interaction (Australia: the first author; Chile: the second author) following an iterative and inductive process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process involved repeated reading of all the transcripts to identify salient traits of these three broad categories and discernable patterns. After our independent analysis, we compared and discussed these traits and patterns. This process yielded two sub-categories of approach to the task, namely, how the task unfolded and relationships that the learners formed.

In coding for how the task unfolded, we noted whether there were distinct phases or sequence of actions and the source of assistance learners sought, if any. When coding for the

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nature of the relationship the groups formed, we noted the amount and nature of group members' contributions and engagement with the task, whether there seemed to be one student who took the lead or whether group leadership was diffused (Storch, 2013). This analysis was supplemented by reference to the observation notes.

The transcripts were also analysed for learners' attention to language form. The unit of analysis used was language-related episodes (LREs). LREs, following the definition proposed by Swain and Lapkin (1998), are "any part of dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others" (p. 326). These episodes can be composed of one turn (e.g., when a learner self-repairs) or many turns as learners consider suggestions and counter-suggestions. Episodes that dealt with two items of language simultaneously were coded as two LREs.

We coded for the quantity, focus of the LREs and how they were initiated. We distinguished between LREs that focused on grammatical form (e.g., verb tense), lexis (word choice, word meaning) and mechanics (e.g., spelling, pronunciation)[2] (for a more detailed discussion of coding data for LREs, see Storch, 2013). When coding for how LREs were initiated, we distinguished between LREs that were self-initiated (i.e., via a self-repair or requests for confirmation) and other-initiated (i.e., via other-repair). We were particularly interested in LREs that showed instances of collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994); that is, instances where learners pooled their linguistic resources to resolve deliberations about language (see Appendix for examples of how LREs were identified and coded).

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To check for inter-rater reliability, the two researchers coded a random sample of six transcripts (three from each context) accounting for 21% of the entire data set. The inter-rater reliability, calculated by a simple agreement rate, reached 84%. Discussion between the two raters resolved the disagreements, most of which stemmed from coding of self-repairs. After discussion, the researchers agreed that self-repairs were only to be coded as LREs if the repair was uttered after a short pause to suggest that the learner was deliberating about language choice.

Analysis for L1 use focused on the amount and functionality of L1. Previous research analyzing learners' L1 use have deployed different measures including the proportion of L1 turns/total turns (Swain & Lapkin, 2000) or L1 words/total words produced (Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Given that different L1s were used in our study, that these L1s varied morphosyntactically, and that some turns were only partially in L1, we decided to quantify L1 use by computing the amount of time spent on L1 use and what proportion it formed of total time on task (see also Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). We also noted the purposes that the L1 served.

RESULTS

Approach to the Task

Before presenting findings about how the learners in the two contexts approached the task, it is important to note at the outset that group membership varied in the two contexts and that this had implications for the approach to the task. In the Australian context, attendance in all sessions was observed to be fairly regular and punctual, with absences limited to one or two students in

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each session. Thus, groups remained stable in terms of group membership over the duration of the study. The approach most groups established in the first session endured over the three weeks.

In the Chilean context, irregular attendance and lateness meant that group memberships changed from one session to another. Even when group membership stayed approximately the same, group dynamics changed over sessions (see discussion of relationships formed).

How the Task Unfolded: Australia. The groups generally began by trying to establish the task requirements. This often involved determining the meaning of the key terms in the prompt and the scope of the topic (i.e., what needs to be covered). If unsure, the students briefly consulted the teacher. In this first stage, the groups also tried to develop their position on the topic given, particularly on controversial topics. These positions were determined either democratically, by negotiating a mutually acceptable position, or pragmatically, by choosing a position that was deemed the easiest to support.

The groups then proceeded to develop their ideas and supporting evidence. This second stage took up the bulk of the time and at times involved internet search. There was also attention to structure, with discussion about what to include in the introduction and conclusion of the presentation. The students (usually the student who was to be the speaker) then proceeded to write a brief presentation script, consisting of key points to be presented. It was during this writing stage when the focus on language tended to occur.

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Three of the six groups also managed to include a practice run stage (Groups 3, 4, 6 in all three sessions), where the speaker read through the written notes, and the other group members then provided some advice, as exemplified in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1:

171 Lisa: I'm really stressed out about it.

172 Doris: You'll be fine. You can really afford to speak a little bit slowly… because the faster you speak the more nervous you are… I speak like crazy.

173 Linh: Yeah slow down, slow down.

174 Doris: There is this guy he speaks really calmly. He's very impressive… and it leaves a really good impression… And look everyone in the eyes.

[Session 3; Group 3]

How the Task Unfolded: Chile. Most groups began with a lengthy (ranging from 1-5 minutes) discussion in order to understand the discussion questions. They clearly found the tasks challenging and used one of two main strategies: (a) getting help from the teacher or (b) solving the issue by themselves using their L1. Excerpt 2 shows how the students resolved a linguistic issue that arose at the start of the task by using the teacher's help. Felipe prompts discussion by eliciting others' opinions only realizing that he did not know the meaning of the word "mining." He immediately seeks help from the teacher who gives a translation in Spanish.

Excerpt 2:

1 Felipe: Do you think Chile should increase its coal mi:ning? M:ining?

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2 Antonio: I don't know what is that and that.

3 Felipe: Mister?

4 Antonio: What means 'coal mining'?

5 Teacher: Coal mining. Coal mining. Carbón [Coal].

6 Felipe: Ya.

7 Antonio: Mining?

8 Teacher: Mining? Minería [Mining].

9 Felipe: Ah ya. [Ah, ok.]

10 Teacher: OK?

11 Antonio: Thank you.

[Session 4; Group 3]

The second strategy the Chilean learners used was to switch to their L1. In Excerpt 3, the group deals with the topic of privatization. Encountering difficulties in understanding the topic, they resort to their shared L1 to clarify the discussion question. Once the topic was clarified, the ensuing group discussion was predominantly in English.

Excerpt 3:

3 Francisca: Comentar… Ya. ¿Cachaste? [Comments… ok… did you understand?]

4 Bastián: De aquí para abajo no más. [From here onwards only.]

5 Francisca: Ehm comentar sobre el transp--. la electricidad, el gas, el transporte público, emergencias, ehm. Las ventajas y las desventajas de ser privatizado o no. [Uhm comment

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about the transp--. The electricity, gas, the public transportation, emergencies, ehm. The advantages and disadvantages of being privatized or not.]

6 Bastián: eeh, ¿tips? … ¿Algunas de las que fueron privatizadas en ese momento, o no?... Cachaste laaa, ehm a ver…. [Some of which were privatized at that time, or not? Did you notice ehm let's see….]

[Session 2; Group 4]

Once they clarified the task requirements and key words, the Chilean students proceeded to write their scripts. This was the second and final stage, as no group had a practice run stage. The act of writing as a group often triggered further exchanges of opinion about the topic and pushed the learners to extend their ideas.

Relationships Formed: Australia. In Australia, collaboration was the predominant relationship formed. Of the six groups, five worked collaboratively in each of the three sessions. There were a number of salient traits that distinguished the behaviour and talk of collaborative groups. In collaborative groups, the main source of assistance was the peers themselves. Requests for assistance took the form of direct questions about economic events, trends, and terms (e.g., "Do we still have a global financial crisis?" "What is GST?" "How can I say….?"), confirmation requests seeking reassurance (e.g., "Can I say that?"), and admission of confusion. Peers offered explanations and information willingly and promptly, and predominantly in the L2.

Assistance was provided not only in response to requests but was also at times unsolicited. For example, in Group 2, Gavin announced early in the very first session that all group members

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should help the speaker saying: “Let’s help Melanie to have more points.” There was also assistance in the form of moral support when the speaker admitted to feeling nervous (see Excerpt 1).

Students’ engagement in co-constructing ideas and collective scaffolding were also salient traits of collaborative groups. For example, Group 3, when discussing Australia’s future performance, pooled their knowledge to co-construct a statement about Australia’s unemployment rate that included information about the trend and the reason for the trend. As Excerpt 4 shows, the requests for information were answered directly (Turns 92, 95) and there was also evidence of students collaboratively completing each other’s sentences (Turns 93-94):

Excerpt 4:

92 Doris: So unemployment is going down?

93 Lisa: Going down in the short term but in the future …

94 Linh: It’s expected to go up. What’s the reason?

95 Doris: Because inflation is expected to go down.

96 Lisa: Yeah, yeah.

[Session 1; Group 3]

One of the distinguishing linguistic feature of collaborative group talk is the predominant use of the first person plural pronoun (Storch, 2002) reflecting a sense of collegiality and joint responsibility for the task. The use of first person plural pronouns was frequent in the collaborative group talk in the Australian data, as exemplified in Excerpt 5.

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Excerpt 5:

11 Declan: Let's write it down (re-reads instruction). … Australia is trying to achieve some macroeconomic objectives… then we can talk about … full employment… so we have to say what those objectives are …

12 Tetsuya: Yeah, yeah.

13 Yiting: I think we need to say it's good or not.

13 Declan: Yeah, yeah that will be our content.

14 Tetsuya: So we talk about GDP and unemployment…

[Session 1; Group 6]

However, not all groups formed collective units. One group (Group 4), composed of four female students, had two students (Bee and Marta) who dominated the interaction and two who contributed very little to the task. What distinguished this group's interaction in each of the three sessions was the lack of collegiality. The relationship formed could be labelled dominant/passive (Storch, 2002). The salient traits of this group's interaction were long monologues by the two dominant members who presented factual information that they found on the internet. Indeed, the internet was their most frequently used source of information, with the group spending about 20-30% of each session time on searching and reading aloud long extracts from the internet. Instances of co-construction were rare and assistance provided minimal. This is illustrated in Excerpt 6, when Devina, an inactive group member in the preceding sessions, seeks assistance because it is her turn to be the speaker. The group talk shows evidence of the dominant group

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members (Marta and Bee) becoming increasingly exasperated with the many questions Devina asks. The answers they provide are brief and do not always address what was asked. Instead of offering assistance, they direct her to consult the internet. The lack of collegiality in this group was evident also in the absence of first person plural pronouns in their talk.

Excerpt 6:

86 Devina: So the consequences?

87 Marta: The consequences will be less …

88 Devina: Less tax?

89 Marta: It won't be a popular move.

90 Bee: Maybe you should search on the internet so you can understand.

[Session 3; Group 4]

Relationships Formed: Chile. In the Chilean data, most of the groups (nine of the 13 group interactions) also worked collaboratively. When collaborating, learners were engaged with the task, focusing on the topic at hand, helping each other both to complete the task and address language gaps. Collaborative patterns were evident especially in the way in which learners acknowledged each other's opinions and/or confirming each other's understanding. For instance, in Excerpt 7, the group discusses Chile's economic performance. Manuel shares his analysis of the provided graph, which was followed by Juan José's enthusiastically acknowledging ("Yes, yes, yes") Manuel's opinions and then adding his own analysis.

Excerpt 7:

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117 Manuel: the, el [the], between six percent and eight percent, no more than that. But [j]ere, you have twelve percent of unemployment.

118 Juan José: Yes, yes, yes.

119 Manuel: And here, ten percent. Here is like, six percent, but, is…

120 Juan José: Period of Piñera, the twenty-twelve, and--

121 Manuel: Is just, nothing the employment, six percent, four percent, hum, five percent.

122 Juan José: Yeah, five percent, but…

[Session 1; Group 1]

Overall, when a group was collaborative, the learners encouraged each other to contribute to the discussion by saying, for instance, "Go ahead" and using prompts such as "Depending on what?" and "And?". Also, appreciation of each other's contribution was evident from phrases such as "That's good idea!" Turn-takings also seemed to be a telling sign of collaboration; when a group was collaborative, all the members took turns equally without long silences between the turns.

Dominant/passive relationships were also found in the Chilean data (in four of the 13 groups). However, even in dominant/passive groups, the passive students at times offered effective linguistic support. In Excerpt 8, the learners discuss advantages of lowering income taxes in Chile. While the discussion is controlled by Manuel and Jason, Daniel, who contributed very little during the entire interaction, offers effective linguistic assistance: After noticing that Jason was struggling to produce the word "evade", Daniel corrects Jason's pronunciation. Later

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Daniel again helps his group by supplying the word “pay” which was successfully incorporated by Manuel.

Excerpt 8:

244 Jason: OK, the advantage is the people…

245 Manuel: Earns more money.

246 Jason: don’t, ‘evasi’? ‘evasi’? dooon’t…

247 Manuel: Ha, good question.

248 Daniel: Evade.

249 Manuel: Evade? Evade.

250 Jason: Don’t evade, don’t evade income, income tax.

251 Manuel: Yeah.

252 Jason: The people will be more cl[ea]r.

253 Manuel: Clear, yeah.

254 Jason: Yeah.

255 Manuel: But if we talk about the normal situation, that the people…

256 Daniel: Pay the taxes.

257 Manuel: Yeah, pay the taxes, uh…

[Session 3; Group 3]

Interaction features that were salient in non-collaborative group interactions were: (a) long silence; (b) slow turn-takings; (c) predominant use of L1; (d) ignorance and/or disrespect of each

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other's ideas or L2 use; and (e) over-reliance on the teacher. In Excerpt 9, the group is discussing issues related to the pension age. First, César supports Paula's idea about the aging society. Although César tries to continue to discuss the topic, Paula turns to the teacher to get the translation for the word "pension." César provides the correct word but his contribution is ignored by Paula. Paula keeps trying to communicate with the teacher while ignoring other members' offers of support. In addition to the lack of acknowledgement or appreciation of each other's contribution to the task, the students communicate with each other primarily in Spanish, often with long silences between the turns.

Excerpt 9

43 César: The people in country getting older?

44 Paula: Yes, mm, not like 50 years ago, so…the popula[tion] is older, and…eh…

45 César: I think if that is [o]bvious…work too long. Fifty years work? A lot.

46 Paula: Profe?

47 Teacher: Yes, dear?

48 Paula: Como se dice…eh [How do you say… uhm]

49 César: The pension. Cincuenta años. Igual es harto. [Fifty years. That's a lot]

50 Teacher: 'How can I say'

(the discussion diverts to the use of the word 'depends')

53 Paula: How can I say, the population is older.

54 Andrea: Sí po. [yeah]

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55 César: Ya po, viste. Eso te decía. [Yeah, you see. That's what I was saying]

[Session 3; Group 2]

LREs

Table 2 summarises the findings for LREs. The table shows the total frequency and means of LREs, their focus, and how they were initiated.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

Overall, during the comparable durations of task engagement, the Chilean learners generated more LREs (276) than the Australian learners (147). The overall difference primarily stemmed from the difference in the frequency of L-LREs (Chile = 203; Australia = 96). The amount of attention the learners in the two contexts paid to grammatical issues was comparable (Chile = 73; Australia = 51). Whereas the Chilean learners tended to initiate LREs by themselves, the Australian students tended to initiate LREs mainly by other-repairs.

Resolution of LREs, particularly in the Australian groups, was often achieved by students pooling their linguistic resources (collective scaffolding), rather than relying on the teacher or artifacts (e.g., internet). On a few occasions, L1 was used as a resource to supply translation of words, particularly in the case of groups where some learners shared an L1 (see findings on L1 use). Excerpt 10 comes from the data of Group 2, where four of the five students were of Chinese L1 background. The excerpt illustrates students pooling their resources, including an L1 shared by some group members, to finally work out the required word (multiplier).

Excerpt 10:

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62 Gavin: I think it's a bit hard to explain… if the government lower taxes, the individuals will have more money to spend and the money comes to the company so the company will have more money… I don't know the terminology for this but… I know it in Chinese.

63 Melanie: What is it?

64 Gavin: [Chinese]

65 Nancy: Multiplication?

66 Gavin: Multiplication… multiplying… so there is a terminology in microeconomics, a small change will have a very strong effect (continues in Chinese)

67 Melanie: So what is it called?

68 Nancy: I think it's multi effect…

69 Gavin: Multiply

(discussion digresses to other issues)

76 Nancy: So multiplying… multiplication

77 Queenie: Multiplier effect

78 Nancy: Oh multiplier!

[Session 3; Group 2]

Evidence of such pooling of linguistic resources was also found in the Chilean groups. As shown in Excerpt 11, while discussing global warming issues in relation to economic growth, Heinz tries to provide an example to support his argument. He realizes then that he does not know how to express the concept of "cases." Bastián then proposes the word. Heinz continues

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but stops again. This time César jumps in by following up Bastián's word supply. Heinz finally uses the proposed word, which was followed by Martín's concrete and relevant example (Soquimich is a Chilean mineral company that was exposed in the media).

Excerpt 11:

28 Heinz: ju: (how) well the Chile economy performance cu:rrently? Well, eh, I shink (think) the economy of [Sh]ile is ah, regular, becooos (because) eh, ¿Cómo digo que han pasado muchos sucesos? [How do I say that many events have happened?]

29 Bastián: ¿Casos? Case?

30 Heinz: Becooos (because) for so many eh…

31 César: Case…

32 Heinz: case, of…for example…

33 Martín: case Soquimich

32 Heinz: sipo [yeah], case Soquimich, ca[sh]e Penta…

[Session 1; Group 2]

First Language Use

In the Australian data, the use of the L1 varied and averaged 8.36% of interaction time (42 out of 536 minutes in total). However, we realized that the extensive use of L1 (Chinese) by only one group (Group 1) skewed the data. In two sessions (Sessions 2 and 3), the proportions of L1 use of total time on task by this group were 77.24% and 59.23%, respectively. In this group, all members shared the same L1. Episodes in which the L1 was used were often lengthy, some

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lasting for 5 minutes. The L1 seemed to be used predominantly to discuss economic terms and processes as it was often interspersed with English terms (e.g., interest rate). In the other five groups, composed of learners from different L1 backgrounds, two or three of the group members often had the same L1 (Chinese). Of these five mixed groups, only two groups used their L1 but did so sparingly (less than 2% of total talk time). The L1 was used predominantly to search for or provide translation of L2 words, as shown in Excerpt 10. In fact, when Group 1 data from Sessions 2 and 3 was removed from the L1 analysis, the average of L1 use time per group interaction was 0.36%, showing that L1 use was infrequent in the Australian data as a whole.

In the Chilean data, L1 use was observed in all groups. The average time of L1 use per transcript was 20.62% (72 out of 351 minutes in total). This was despite the fact that the teacher announced to the whole class to communicate in English then walked around telling the students to try to express their opinions in English. Sometimes, this resulted in the students overtly enforcing each other to speak in English ("You need to say that in English"); however, at other times they tried to hide the use of the L1 with the exchanges in Spanish being whispered.

The purposes for using L1 in the Chilean data were: (a) to resolve LREs; (b) to express complex ideas; (c) to manage the direction of the task; and (d) to communicate with the teacher. The following are examples of typical L1 use related to task management. "¿Quién va a escribir? [Who is going to write it?]" (Manuel; Session 2; Group 3); "OK…And…this is…this is. ¿Quién va a salir Adelante? [Who is going to the front?]" (Heinz; Session 1; Group 2). The use of L1 to communicate with the teacher comes as a surprise given that the teacher was trying to encourage

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L2 use. It was observed, however, that when asked by students to clarify a term or on how best to express an idea, the teacher tended to give translation in Spanish (see Excerpt 2).

DISCUSSION

Our study set out to investigate how L2 learners in two distinct language learning contexts engaged in the same task. What distinguishes our study from the outset is that it was classroom based, where the tasks formed part of the regular class work over a number of sessions rather than a one-off activity. We found both similarities and differences in the two contexts as well as expected and unexpected findings. We interpret these findings using the lens of AT (Engeström, 2001), a theory that focuses on the context and notions of community, division of labour, and rules as well as tools to explain observable human behaviour in a particular domain. We summarise our findings using the model of AT, presented in Figure 2.

Our findings revealed that in both contexts the actions of the learners in terms of their overall approach to the task were similar, particularly in how the task began. The groups generally commenced with an attempt to clarify task requirements and key terms and then establish a position. However, the nature of the help seeking actions and the source of the help (mediating tools) differed. Although the learners in both contexts often sought advice from the teacher in the initial stage, the distinguishing traits in the EFL context were the relatively long time spent on this first stage, the extensive teacher assistance, and the heavy reliance on the shared L1.

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These differences between the two cohorts are perhaps not surprising and can be explained by reference to the broader ESL and EFL contexts. Whereas in ESL contexts, the use of TBLT is widespread and communicative tasks deploying authentic topics are familiar to the students, this is not the case in EFL contexts (McKay, 2003), including Chile. In such classes, and, even in classes where the teacher advocates group work, discussion topics tend to be based on the textbook, are decontextualized and rarely authentic.

The students' relative lack of experience with such communicative tasks and struggle to understand the task prompts may also explain the Chilean teacher's willingness to provide extensive assistance. However, another context-related factor that may explain this predominant source of assistance is the informality in this specific local community (the class) between the subjects (students) and their teacher. The informal teacher-student relations observed in this Chilean EFL class, encapsulated by the notions of rules and division of labor in AT (see Figure 2), was evident in the warm greetings and banter observed in the class. The students clearly felt comfortable to seek such assistance. Although the ESL students also sought teacher assistance, there were fewer such requests and the assistance provided more limited.

The shared L1 in Chile was an expedient tool used by the students and the teacher to explain key terms and enabled the learners to proceed with the task. Among the Australian ESL groups, the one group where all members shared an L1 (Chinese) also used the shared language extensively. In the other groups, where only some members shared an L1, there was only occasional use of L1 to explain key terms. Overall, however, there was minimal use of L1,

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perhaps in compliance with a tacit understanding that in an ESL class, students are expected (*rules*) to communicate in the L2 (see also Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). These expectations are also present in the EFL classes, evident in the teacher's vocal encouragement to use the L2 and the learners whispering to each other in the shared L1, but are perhaps harder to enforce.

As the task unfolded, differences in approach to the task emerged, reflecting different objects. For the Australian ESL students, the object was on producing an effective presentation. This was evident in the advice members of the groups provided to the designated presenter. The students clearly focused on performance, on delivering a coherent, well-structured and effective presentation, in line with the assessment criteria of this task and perhaps the perceived ultimate outcome of enrolling in this EAP elective (learning to speak fluently and confidently in the L2). The Chilean students focused on exchanging ideas but also on language. For these students, the object was language learning, and the activity was perceived as an opportunity to use and learn the L2. In addition, the learners' L2 proficiency may have impacted on their objects and perceptions. For the Chilean students, their intermediate level of L2 proficiency necessitated a greater focus on language deliberations. Hence, the larger number of LREs (particularly L-LREs) found in Chilean data. In other words, L2 proficiency may have intertwined with the learners' perceptions and goals in the approach to the task.

Our findings revealed that most of the groups in both contexts collaborated, but particularly so in the Australian context where collaborative relationships, once established, remained stable. In the Chilean EFL class relationships fluctuated as group memberships

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changed from one session to the next. The stability of group membership in Australia was due to the rules in this community and in particular expectations related to regular attendance and punctuality. In Chile, there seemed to be a more relaxed attitude to these norms of behaviour.

Collaborative groups in both contexts pooled their linguistic resources to co-construct the content of the presentation and to resolve deliberations about language choice. In the Australian groups, the choice of mediating tools distinguished the collaborative groups from the non-collaborative (dominant/passive) group. Whereas the non-collaborative group relied on artifacts, and particularly web-based sources, the collaborative groups relied mainly on 'social mediators' (Engeström, 2008); that is, the members of the group. Moreover, in the ESL groups, the assistance learners provided each other went beyond constructing the presentation script and addressing language gaps (i.e., LREs). As noted earlier, assistance extended to advice on presentation and allaying performance related anxiety. We were somewhat surprised by these findings, given the individual grades given to the presenters and the more competitive and individualistic environment in the Australian university. We explain these unexpected findings in the Australian context by reference to these learners' transformed object and goals.

Strategies learners adopt during activities and language choices are manifestations of their beliefs about the activity and their goals. In the Australian context, the use of first person plural pronouns conveyed the collective responsibility group members felt for each individual's performance. Thus, the object in these collaborative groups transformed from task completion to the achievement of the highest possible grade for each group member. The actions, offering

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solicited and unsolicited assistance and pooling resources sought to achieve this reframed object. This sense of interdependence was not evident in the one group that displayed an expert/passive relationship, reflected not only in the reluctance to offer assistance but also in the absence of first person pronouns. For this group the object remained the expedient completion of the task. As shown by other studies (e.g., Blin & Appel, 2011; Zhu & Mitchell, 2012), the relationship learners form transforms the object of an activity and the actions taken to achieve the new object.

CONCLUSION

Our study shows that while students may be given the same task instructions, these instructions are merely a blueprint (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). Learners transform the given task so that it accords with their object, an object that may not be predictable. Local, context-related variables (community, norms of behavior) and, more broadly, approaches to L2 instruction further shape the students' actions and goals.

Our study, conducted in authentic L2 classes in two very different L2 teaching/learning contexts, sheds some light on learners' task-based behavior and the intricate interplay of individual and contextual factors that can explain this behaviour. As communicative tasks are increasingly being promoted by current approaches to L2 pedagogy, there is a need for a better understanding of what happens in the 'black box' when learners are asked to complete such tasks. Such an understanding can only be gleaned from studies conducted in a range of language learning contexts, beyond ESL contexts. We also recommend that future studies should include in-depth interviews with the learners and teachers to elicit their perspectives as well. The

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findings of these studies could then better inform the design and implementation of communicative tasks in different L2 learning contexts.

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Footnotes

[1] According to Institution of International Education, 33.5% (97,984 out of 244,289) of the international students in Australia were from China in 2015, which made Chinese students the biggest population among other international students. In addition, 45.1% of them majored in Business and Management.

[2] In the final tally of LREs, mechanical LREs (e.g., dealing with spelling or pronunciation) were included in lexical LREs due to their infrequent occurrence.

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TABLE 1

Learners' Information in the Two Contexts

	Australia	Chile
Course	university-level EAP classes	university-level EAP classes
N	27	22
Gender	female = 20; male = 7	female = 3; male = 19
Age	18-24	20-26
Major	Commerce	Commerce
First language	Varied	Spanish
Proficiency	intermediate to advanced	intermediate
Instructor	Australian (L1: English)	Chilean (L1: Spanish)
Contact hours	4 hours/week	3 hours/week

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TABLE 2

Total Frequencies and Means of LREs in the Two Contexts

	LREs	L-LREs	F-LREs	Self-initiated	Other-initiated
Australia	147 (8.65)	96 (5.65)	51 (3.00)	53 (3.12)	94 (5.53)
Chile	276 (21.23)	203 (15.62)	73 (5.62)	242 (18.62)	34 (2.62)

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FIGURE 1

Activity Theory, Generation 2 (Reprinted from Engeström, 2001)

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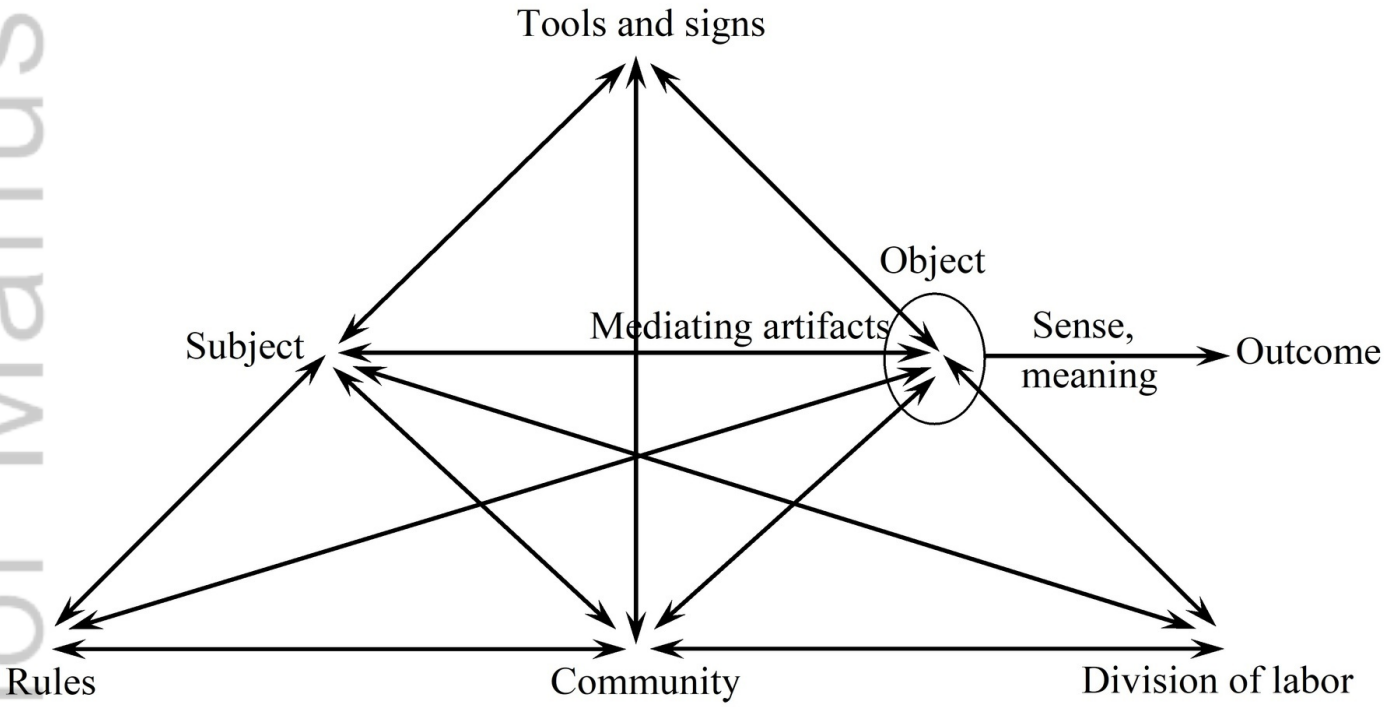
FIGURE 2

An Activity System (adapted from Engeström, 2001) for Peer Interaction and Second Language Learning in the Classroom

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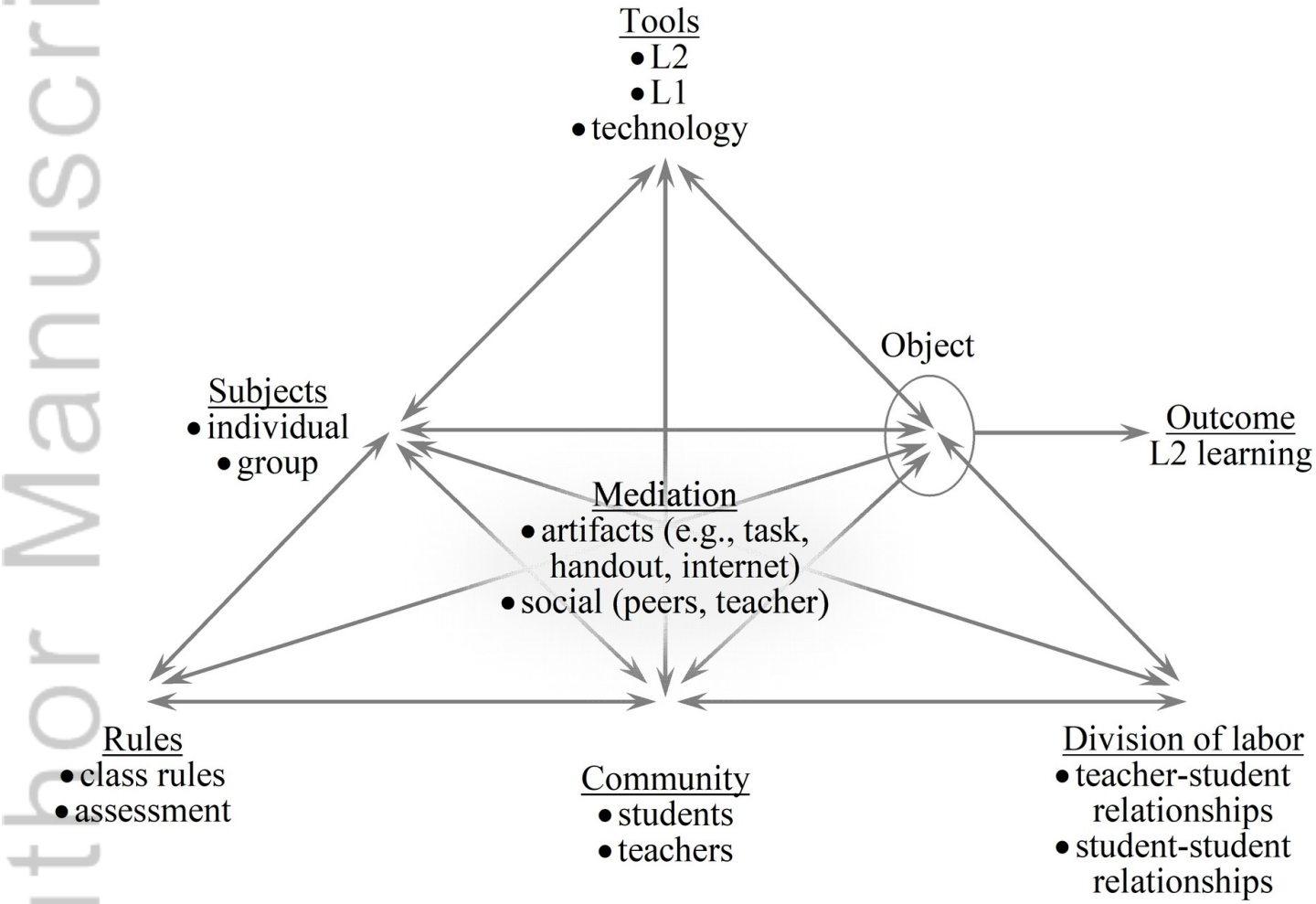
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