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Article

Value Orientations and Off-Topic Interactions: Contradictions in American–Japanese Intercultural Telecollaboration

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Abstract

Drawing from activity theory and its notion of contradictions of various levels, the present study analyzes tensions that emerged during a six-week telecollaborative project between American learners of Japanese (AMU students) and Japanese learners of English (JPU students) regarding expectations and manners of interaction. Transpacific groups of students participated in online discussions of pre-assigned topics and a series of supplemental, reflective tasks such as in-class discussions, weekly journals, and individual interviews. Using a three-stage grounded theory data coding strategy, major contradictions were identified and analyzed. This case study presents negotiation of an emergent contradiction concerning learner expectations and manners of interaction between two transpacific groups. The object of the two JPU participants was oriented more toward exchange value and they faced a contradiction when the transpacific conversation went off-topic, while their AMU partners enjoyed it. Findings also show how the negotiation of a contradiction in an activity system undergoes expansive transformation involving a neighboring activity system.

KEYWORDS: CULTURAL HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY (CHAT); CONTRADICTIONS; TELECOLLABORATION; INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Individuals can learn languages for many reasons, such as an immediate need in their socioeconomic environment. Different learners value different aspects of target language proficiency, and their motivation and priority are inherently multifaceted and always negotiated in a given context (Madyarov, 2008). With technological advancements expanding the avenues of language learning via digital media, intercultural telecollaboration is recognized as a meaningful mode of language learning to accomplish intended learning outcomes via online exchanges.

To better understand the complex human activities in the context of telecollaboration, the unique potential of activity theory was acknowledged in recent years for the in-depth analysis of tensions in telecollaborative projects (Antoniadou, 2011; Basharina, 2007; Madyarov & Taef, 2012). Activity theory is rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1987) and was developed by modern scholars such as Engeström (1987; 2001), often referred to as Cultural Historical Activity Theory (henceforth CHAT). This model captures "a multitude of relations" (Engeström, 1987, p. 78) between factors involved in the context of a human activity, which allows for depicting dynamic configurations of an activity and its transformations over time.

Building on previous research, we explore tensions in a six-week intercultural telecollaborative project between a Japanese-language course at a university in the Southern U.S. and an English-language course at a university located in Hokkaido, Japan. The primary activity of the telecollaboration was asynchronous pair discussion using Google Hangouts. Two questions guided this study: (1) What types of contradictions arise in the central activity systems in intercultural telecollaboration? and (2) How are the identified contradictions negotiated?

Literature Review

Cultural Historical Activity Theory

CHAT is a set of basic principles constituting a general conceptual system called an activity system, which serves as the unit of analysis (Engeström, 1987; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Activity systems analysis, developed by Engeström (1987), is designed to collectively capture situated human activity with a series of triangle diagrams of activity systems.

The model in Figure 1 conceptualizes three mutual relationships between subject, object, and community (Kuutti, 1996), which are defined by Engeström (1993, p. 67) as:

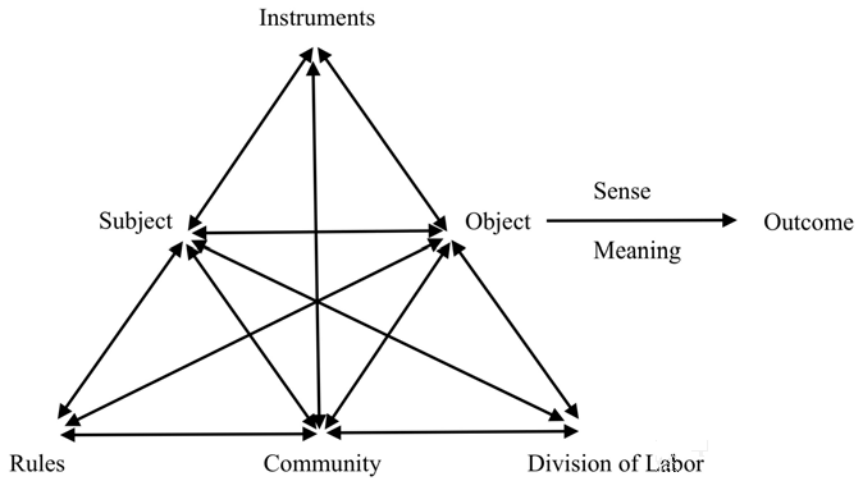

Figure 1. The structure of a human activity system (adapted with permission from Engeström, 1987).

- Subject: individual or subgroup whose agency is chosen as the point-of-view in the analysis.
- Object: "raw material" or "problem space" at which the activity is directed, and which is modeled or transformed into outcomes with the help of tools.
- Community: multiple individuals and subgroups who share the same general object.

Instruments mediate the relationship between subject and object, the relationship between subject and community is mediated by rules, and the division of labor mediates the relationship between object and community. Kuutti (1996, p. 28) defines these three mediators as:

- Instruments: anything used in the transformation process, including material and mental tools.
- Rules: explicit and implicit norms, conventions, and social relations within a community.
- Division of labor: the explicit and implicit organization of a community as related to the transformation process of the object into the outcome.

Each component is embedded in its own cultural, economic, and historical contexts, and an activity system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions, and interests (Engeström, 2001). When an activity system

interacts with other systems, the multi-voicedness is multiplied and always affects and is affected by the unique configurations of neighboring systems (Figure 2).

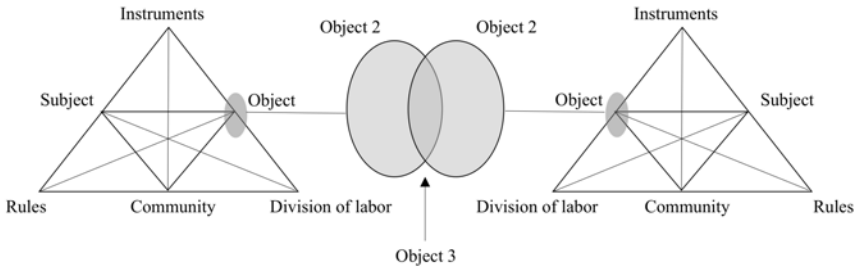

Figure 2. A model of interacting activity systems (adapted with permission from Engeström, 2001, p. 136).

An activity system is subject to dynamic transformation triggered by so-called contradictions, or "a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity" which manifest themselves as "problems, ruptures, breakdowns, clashes" (Kuutti, 1996, p.34). Essentially, activities are always in the process of working through contradictions (Kuutti, 1996), allowing for long-term qualitative, expansive transformations of the previous forms of activity (Engeström, 2001).

Contradictions were investigated by a significant number of scholars who provided valuable pedagogical implications in the respective context of technology-enhanced intercultural learning. Antoniadou (2011) used CHAT to identify contradictions in a transatlantic telecollaboration via Second Life between student teachers in Spain and in the United States. Antoniadou examined how the participants worked through the contradictions and reorganized the activity system through new solutions. For example, the differing academic expectations of the two institutions created a contradiction of objects, which created alternate priorities for the groups and many Spanish participants adopted an individualized division of labor by working independently. Despite the fact that several contradictions remained, some emergent contradictions were resolved via transformation within and across activity systems. For example, the student teachers' initial anxiety about limited technological proficiency was reduced when they were initiated into the technological practice in the platform.

Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch (2014) reported a CHAT study on tensions that emerged in telecollaboration between American students of Chinese and Chinese student teachers of Chinese. Each pair met synchronously for assigned

tasks on Blackboard. Analyzing journals, audio-visual archives, and interview recordings, Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch performed activity systems analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) and identified major tensions: the uneven division of labor, limiting intercultural learning because of extra caution in order to be polite to partners, limiting intercultural learning due to insufficient intercultural competence, and gaps in individual motivations. Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch concluded that these were caused by students' level of intercultural competence in contributing to the outcome of the collaboration.

Use Value and Exchange Value

A closer look at different levels of contradictions and internal configuration allows for a more in-depth account of an emerging conflict as well as preexisting conditions that may or may not evolve into a noticeable issue. According to Engeström (1987), there are multiple levels of contradictions. Primary contradictions occur between use value and exchange value of any corner of an activity system. Each component of an activity system is dual, having an orientation to use value of the activity on one side, and an orientation to exchange value on the other. For example, in a school setting, a school text (the object) can be studied for gaining grades or for meaningful use in real life. Likewise, dual orientation creates two competing forms in each component of the activity system: instruments of recording, recall, and algorithmic problem solving vs. instruments of investigating (instruments); isolation vs. cooperation (division of labor); class of separate individuals vs. team of inquiry (community); competitive adaptation vs. risky rebellion (rules); and grade maker vs. sense maker (subject). These primary contradictions keep the activity system in constant tension and potentially form other levels of contradiction. Secondary contradictions develop between two corners of an activity system, often caused by underlying primary contradictions. Tertiary contradiction arises when the object of a more developed activity is introduced into the central activity system. Finally, quaternary contractions occur between a central activity and neighboring activities, triggered by a tertiary contradiction.

On this account, Madyarov (2008) analyzed different types of contradictions informed by Engeström's work in untangling the complex configurations of contradictions in a distance English-medium course on critical thinking at a university in Iran. Madyarov examined activity systems of student participants motivated by multiple objects, some of which were oriented towards academic and others non-academic. Many primary contradictions highlighted the nature of use and exchange values and led to secondary contradictions that were the potential engines for transformation and development (Engeström, 1987). For example, while the participants had a contradiction between insufficient English proficiency and the object, they eventually

engaged in using English more actively via various innovative actions driven by primary contradictions that constituted the specific configuration of each participant's activity system(s). This study illustrates each action was taken in the complex web of relationships among many elements of the subject's activity system(s) and provides in-depth analysis of underlying forces of the contradictions at higher levels.

Methodology

Setting

This study is based on a telecollaborative project that occurred between a Japanese-language course at an American college (AMU) and an English-language course at a Japanese college (JPU). The AMU participants were 18–23 years old (average age = 20.4) from diverse academic majors. The AMU Japanese language course was not required for all the students. The JPU participants were 19–22 years old (average age = 19.8), and were students in the Commerce Department with varying specializations. All the JPU participants were native Japanese speakers who had studied English in the Japanese school system since they were 13 years old. The English language course at JPU was designed as an intensive preparation course for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), a standardized assessment of English skills.

The Project

Participants engaged in two three-week-long pair-discussion sessions for a total of six weeks, preceded by a week of orientation. They used the written chat function of Google Hangouts, available on computers as well as mobile devices. Due to the 13-hour time difference between Japan and the Eastern United States, the transpacific interactions were asynchronous by default. Discussion topics set by the teacher-researchers included (1) Education System and College Life and (2) Experience of Learning English/Japanese. Participants were required to communicate in Japanese for the first discussion and in English for the second, and to create three discussion questions for each. They also completed two sets of questionnaires, a weekly journal, and an individual interview. AMU participants were required to write Japanese essays based on the discussions, while JPU participants were to write English essays individually reflecting on the project and give an in-class presentation in groups. Since the project was a part of the course grade (AMU = 15%, JPU = 10%), participants' performance was assessed based on participation, punctuality for project-related deadlines, and quality of project-related products.

Participants

Although 20 AMU students and 33 JPU students participated in the project, we selected two transpacific pairs on a purposive sampling approach. Key criteria for selection of participants were relevance to our research questions, analytical framework, and analytical practice. Specifically, visibility of an emerging issue (e.g., participants' articulation of an issue in the journal, or obvious trace of conflict in the interaction logs) was critical to investigating its internal configurations and the participants' resulting negotiations. The two pairs, Tiffany and Hikari, and Ethan and Toru, showed the highest visibility of conflicts from the early stage of collaboration and demonstrated uniqueness of each context.

Tiffany was a 19-year-old female student at AMU whose major was marketing. She had studied Japanese for three years and was taking the Japanese course as major elective. She did a homestay in Japan for two weeks when she was in her 6th grade and started studying Japanese afterward based on her strong interest in the Japanese language and culture. Ethan, another AMU participant, was 20 years old at the time of the study and majoring in Japanese. He developed an interest in the Japanese language and culture as a child. Both Tiffany and Ethan indicated they were excited about the collaboration and not worried about what they were to experience.

Hikari was a 22-year-old JPU student studying law, and Toru was 20 years old and majoring in commerce. Both Hikari and Toru started studying English when they were 13, as required by the Japanese compulsory education system, and were taking the English course as part of university-wide requirements. Both Hikari and Toru indicated a low level of excitement and claimed they were very nervous, especially about their English skills, expected workload, potential conflicts, and partner's participation. In addition, they both showed a high level of obligatory feeling toward the project.

Data Collection and Analysis

The instruments used to collect data included questionnaires, chat logs, emails, journals, and interviews. The pre-discussion questionnaire asked for participants' demographic information, language and culture learning experiences, as well as their expectations and feelings about the project. The post-discussion questionnaire was designed to elicit participants' critical evaluation of the project design, project execution, and over-time changes in their performance, attitudes, and feelings. Chat logs were collected at the end of each discussion period. Emails played an essential role throughout the project for teacher–student communication, specifically for project-related inquiries, announcements, and reminders. Weekly journals were submitted online where participants provided personal reflections in their native language.

Individual interviews were carried out at both institutions to follow up on post-discussion questionnaires.

This study followed two major methodological frameworks: grounded theory, as a magnifying lens to identify tensions, and activity systems analysis, as an analytical, interpretive lens for such tensions. After thorough examination of the data following the grounded theory-based coding strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), contradictions were identified and underwent activity theory analysis. Following Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch (2014), an AMU–JPU telecollaboration activity system model was created beforehand to provide a tentative and general definition with each node of the intended activity (see Figure 3). Each node was to be redefined based on the subject's viewpoint in the analysis. The interactive nature of the negotiation process was captured by showing two neighboring systems as in Figure 2.

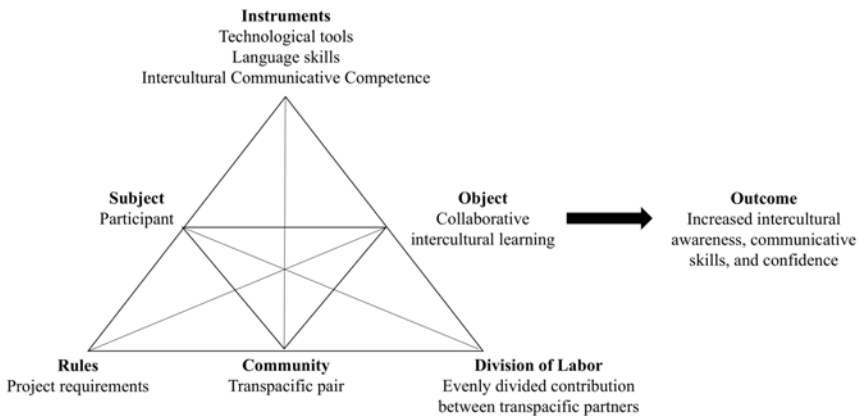

Figure 3. Ideal model of AMU–JPU telecollaboration activity system.

Findings

Duality of Object and Discomfort

The pre-discussion questionnaire revealed participants' motivations and priorities as shown in Table 1:

All four participants viewed learning the target language along with getting a good grade as top priorities. For Tiffany, getting a good grade was a plus that would come with achieving higher proficiency in Japanese: "I just want to be fluent in Japanese, but …, getting a good grade's also nice …" (interview). Ethan also acknowledged the importance of a good grade during his interview while he stressed his strong interest in the language and his hope to become more proficient. On the other hand, Hikari explained during the interview how her motivation to get a good grade was driven by her anxiety

Table 1
Summary of Questionnaire Answers

	Hikari	Tiffany
Why study the target language?	• Major requirement • Job hunting & exams • Daily life	• Major requirement • Interest in language and culture
Priorities	1. To improve my language skills and help my partner's language learning 2. To get a good grade; to learn and share cultural values; to initiate and have active interactions 3. To build a friendship	1. To improve my language skills and help my partner's language learning; to get a good grade 2. To learn and share cultural values; to initiate interactions 3. To build a friendship
	Toru	**Ethan**
Why study the target language?	• Major requirement • Job hunting & exams • Future jobs	• Major requirement • Job hunting • Interact in language and culture
Priorities	1. To improve my language skills and help my partner's language learning; to get a good grade; to learn and share cultural values; to initiate and have active interactions 2. To build a friendship	1. To improve my language skills and help my partner's language learning; to get a good grade 2. To learn cultural values; to have active interactions 3. To share cultural values; to initiate interactions; to build a friendship

about getting a job: "I have to prepare well for the TOEIC tests for job hunting" (translated). Regarding the question of whether she wanted to be more proficient in English, Hikari continued: "I'm not sure if I'll need English in my workplace" (translated).

Similarly, Toru stressed the importance of English tests for his future job: "It's important to get a good TOEIC score … I wouldn't be able to get into a good company without it" (interview, translated). Thus, the questionnaire and interviews revealed the object of Tiffany and Ethan's activity system was configured with greater use value than exchange value, while the object of Hikari and Toru's activity system was more oriented towards exchange value or test scores (see Figure 4).

Negotiating the Rules

As soon as transpacific interactions began, Hikari expressed a concern about whether her partner directly answered her questions. She commented in her first journal: "I am sorry that she did not thoroughly answer some of my questions" (translated). By contrast, Tiffany positively reflected on the first week of

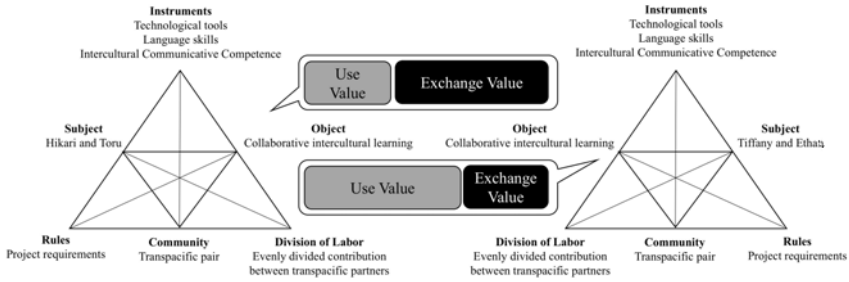

Figure 4. Internal configuration of the objects of central activity systems.

discussion: "I appreciate how polite my partner is ... I also really appreciated how she sent me a picture of what she did on the weekend." In addition, Hikari commented negatively on how their discussion sometimes branched off the main topic, while Tiffany seemed to enjoy expanding the topic. The excerpt below is from the conversation between Hikari and Tiffany where they discussed the topic of language learning:

1	HIKARI:	What is a difficult Japanese point?
2		The point with No.1 difficult about English is pronunciation.
3	TIFFANY:	That's very interesting, have you ever thought about visiting America?
4		I think the most difficult part of Japanese is *kanji* or particles.
5		Do you have a lot of homework in your English class?
6		How much do you study for exams in English class?
7	HIKARI:	I sometimes wished to go to America repeatedly. However, much money is
8		required to go to America. And I had still gone overseas once yet.
9		Although it had said that you had come to Japan before, where of Japan
10		did it go then?
11		In the lesson of my English there is no homework other than this project.
12		What kind of homework do you have taken out with a Japanese class? I do
13		preparation for an examination for about 5 hours on the previous day. Do
14		you have an opportunity to talk with Japanese people in Japanese in a usual
15		life?

Reflecting on this interaction that spanned two weeks in terms of journal entry, Tiffany expressed a positive evaluation of the interaction because it was an exchange of rich cultural information. On the other hand, Hikari commented on her journal: "It was nice I could discuss a lot about the topic. There were some off-topic interactions, though" (translated). In the following week, she continued: "Continuing the previous week, there were some questions that were off-topic … We discussed various things, but we couldn't discuss the topic in depth" (translated). To Hikari, the small talk initiated by Tiffany about Hikari visiting America and Tiffany's visit to Japan was off-topic and she was bothered by it. The interview with Hikari revealed that her understanding

of the rules, especially about the chat contents, was that she should talk solely about the pre-assigned topics: "I thought I'd have to talk just about those topics, but (she wouldn't) …" (translated). In other words, Hikari's object oriented more towards exchange value called for rules to follow so she could complete the project. Talking about the pre-assigned topics was as important to Hikari as other project requirements. When it was interrupted due to Tiffany's continuous initiation of off-topic interactions, Hikari faced a contradiction between the object and the rule.

Facing the discomfort, Hikari started going with the flow, responding to off-topic contents and further expanding them (lines 25–28):

16 TIFFANY: Perhaps one day you will be able to come to America for a visit. When I
17 came to Japan, I travelled to Tokyo, Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Miyajima. The
18 one I liked the most was Tokyo because there was a lot of shopping. We
19 had the opportunity to meet the Prime Minister while I was in Japan.
20 I have homework in my Japanese class every day, and there are quizzes
21 about once a week. I usually do not have the opportunity to talk to
22 Japanese people because there are not that many people who speak
23 Japanese in America. I only speak Japanese in my Japanese class. Do you
24 have the opportunity to speak English with Americans?
25 HIKARI: Did you come to Japan and what mainly see? I have also been to the
26 Kinkajuji Temple or the A-bomb memorial dome by the school trip of a
27 high school. The prime minister !? Why was there such any precious
28 opportunity?

Provoked by the object–rule contradiction, Hikari tried to get the conversation back on track. After seeing no change in Tiffany's manner of interaction, Hikari next redefined the rules, from those oriented towards exchange value to those oriented towards use value. Through this negotiation of the rules, Hikari's discomfort was reduced, as evident in her increased engagement in the off-topic conversations as well as the absence of critical comments on Tiffany's participation in the journal toward the end of the project. Figure 5 illustrates Hikari's negotiation of contradiction.

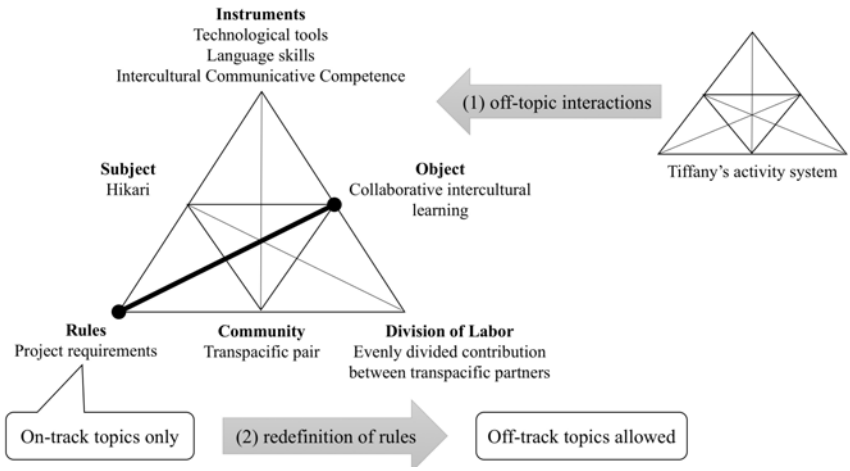

Figure 5. Hikari's negotiation of contradiction between the object and the rules.

Forcing a Change

Toru experienced a similar contradiction to Hikari. Compared to Hikari, Toru expressed a more powerful orientation to exchange value of the object in his journal: "I was able to achieve the goal of talking about the topic"; "I didn't waste any time because I was following the topic" (translated). His journal was comprised exclusively of his reflections on whether he was following the rules, rather than his feelings about the interactions or a summary of what they discussed.

A contradiction surfaced toward the end of the second topic of language learning. Ethan thought they had a good discussion and brought up an off-topic conversation about the cooking club Toru had previously mentioned.

1	ETHAN:	Have you done anything interesting with the cooking club recently?
2	TORU:	I have done nothing with that. And I have made a dinner recently. I have
3		learned to make a dish. I like France. So, I learned English and Japanese
4		and I wanted to make dish of France by visiting France. Also, language is
5		useful for these cases. Especially, English is spoken by many people all over
6		the world. Therefore, we should know again they are important for us.
7	ETHAN:	I haven't tried many French foods, but I like Cordon bleu and quiche
8		lorraine.
9	TORU:	They are nice! I like them too!
10		By the way, we must talk about the meaning of learning languages, don't
11		you?

Ethan opened the new topic to keep the conversation going. Toru, on the other hand, responded to Ethan's question and managed to bring the flow toward the main topic of language learning (lines 3–6). However, Ethan kept talking

about food rather than language learning at his next turn (lines 7–8). In reaction to this, Toru directly pointed out the irrelevance of the topic (lines 10–11).

Ethan's priority had also been talking about assigned topics, but it was more loosely defined allowing both exchange value and use value aspects of the object. Ethan explained during his interview that he thought it would be okay to go off-topic at times, or when they were done talking about the assigned topics. On the other hand, Toru's understanding of the rules was strictly informed by the exchange value of the object, for which nothing off-topic was expected.

Thus, there emerged a contradiction between the object and the rules in Toru's activity system because going off-topic was against the greater exchange value that informed his object and rules. To negotiate this contradiction, Toru explicitly pointed out the irrelevance of the topic of cooking. In response, there emerged a contradiction between the object and the rules in Ethan's activity system because his rules did not fit well with Toru's. As the misfit surfaced, Ethan's understanding of the rules was negotiated, causing a change from "off-track topics allowed" to "on-track topics only," geared from use value orientation to exchange value orientation. After negotiating the contradiction in his activity system, Ethan went back on track to the assigned topic, which then reduced Toru's discomfort. Figure 6 illustrates how these contradictions were negotiated over time.

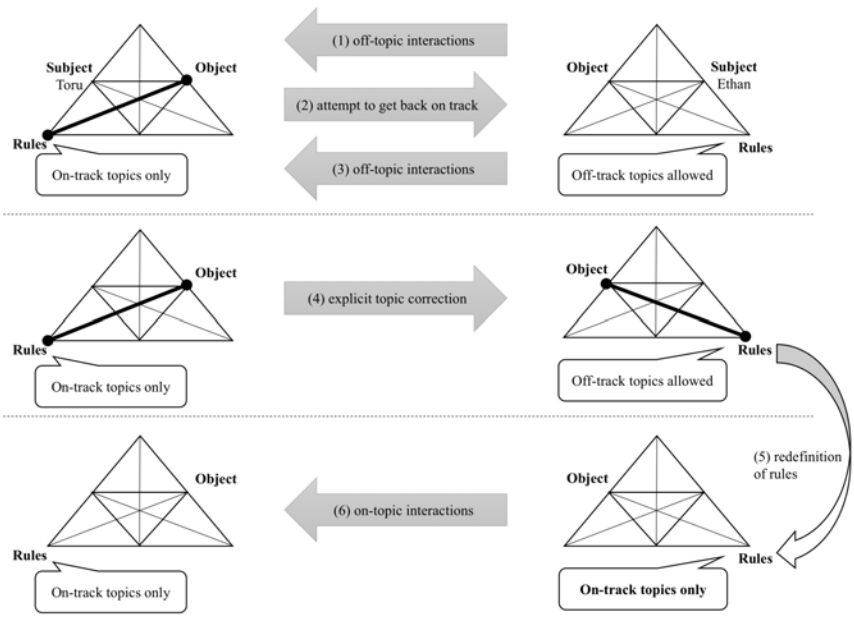

Figure 6. Negotiation of contradictions between the object and the rules in two activity systems.

In Hikari's case, the object–rule contradiction was not explicitly negotiated during the interaction with Tiffany. Instead, she did not break the flow of their conversation and implicitly negotiated it within her journal entries by critically reflecting on how off-topic some of their conversation was and changed her manner of interaction. On the other hand, in Toru's case, this contradiction was explicitly negotiated through the interaction. When Toru encountered an off-topic flow of conversation, he managed to interrupt to bring it back to where it should be by directly pointing it out.

Discussion

The findings of this study corroborated previous CHAT-informed work in that pre-existing potential tension within a component of an activity system served as a foundation for other levels of contradiction (Foot, 2014). As presented in the two cases above, the object of an activity is inherently dual comprising use value and exchange value on a unique balance in the given context. These contrastive values co-existed *a priori* in each participant's activity system, and a secondary contradiction between the object and the rules surfaced when what Hikari and Toru were following did not satisfy the object in its exchange value. The secondary contradiction then triggered a change to negotiate the misfit.

This study also shows how activity systems are subject to expansive transformation. In Toru and Ethan's case, one contradiction led to the qualitative transformation of Toru's actions, which then triggered Ethan's actions in response. Toru first experienced a contradiction in his system, tried to negotiate it, which then created a contradiction in Ethan's system. Their actions in trying to resolve misfits were affected by and affected each other's actions, which would cause an endless loop unless the target activity comes to an end by an external force.

The concept of historicity helps us understand what contributed to the noticeable gap in the balance of use value and exchange value of the object in each pair. Corroborating Belz's (2002) and Ware's (2005) findings that a gap in language valuation may affect learner motivation and participation, this study finds that differential societal valuations of English and Japanese in Japanese and American societies, respectively, contributed to the unique configurations of the object. For Hikari and Toru, the socioeconomic status of English may have played a significant role in the object configuration. In Japan, there is a strong valuation of English as a socioeconomic tool, indicated by the fact that it is a required subject through grades 7 to 12, and that a national policy was adopted in 2011 to start foreign language (i.e., English) education as early as

in 5th grade (MEXT, 2015). In addition to English courses in schools, entrance examinations to high school and college typically include English. In many Japanese colleges, English courses are part of major requirements, and even after college, Japanese companies ask for proof of English proficiency, usually with TOEIC scores. As TOEIC tests are in the right-or-wrong format, learners tend to value accuracy more than a communicative use of English.

As illustrated in numerous studies on motivation among Japanese learners of English (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009; Yashima, 2000, to name just a couple), one of the strongest driving forces for English learning is the imagined socioeconomic need of English proficiency under the name of globalization. Hikari and Toru's motivation was also strongly driven by the prevailing idea that they need to study English to obtain a job. Moreover, the idealized English skills they pursued were not necessarily linked with practical proficiency in their future profession (Taguchi et al., 2009). Yashima (2000) explicitly argued that a common motivational factor among many Japanese learners of English is a vague sense of necessity where they "feel vaguely it will become a necessity to use English in the 'internationalized' society" (p. 131), as indicated by Hikari and Toru's uncertainty about the practical value of learning English. In other words, the object of Hikari and Toru's activity was predominantly composed of external factors oriented toward exchange value, instead of personal motivations linked to use value.

On the other hand, the object of Tiffany and Ethan's activity was oriented toward learning practical skills needed for personal success in using Japanese, instead of external, societal expectations and practices. While there were approximately 155,000 learners of Japanese in 2012 in the United States (The Japan Foundation, 2012), the Japanese language does not have as high a socioeconomic value as English in Japan. Few American K-12 schools offer Japanese in their curriculum, and even if a school does offer Japanese, it is not required in most cases. In colleges, too, Japanese is merely one of many language choices for language requirements in many parts of the United States. There is little socioeconomic need for Japanese proficiency in students' daily lives, and in most cases, learners' initial motivation to learn Japanese comes from their interest in Japanese culture. With less societal expectations, Tiffany and Ethan were regulated by personal and internalized motivations, looking to become successful in the target language for personal or professional reasons.

The findings also suggest that different learners have different levels of orientations to use value and exchange value, as illustrated by Hikari being more acceptive of redefining the rules than Toru. From a pedagogical perspective, it is important to note that learners' priority is always in negotiation with multiplicity in the configuration of their motivation and context (Madyarov, 2008).

At one point, some may emphasize the use value of the target language in their lives, while others may prioritize the exchange value, or the orientation towards earning a grade (Engeström, 1987; Madyarov, 2008). One learner or group of learners may have a certain balance of these two values at one point, which may be different from others both in quantity and quality.

Primary contradictions are not something that are fixed or resolved. Contrasting values inherently exist in any activity system, beyond the control of project administrators. Some contradictions may be visible or foreseeable from the beginning, while others may be noticeable only because of participants' actions. To identify foreseeable contradictions, O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) suggest that teachers give profound consideration to (1) the learner's level of intercultural competence, (2) learner's motivation and expectations, (3) teacher–teacher relationships, (4) task design, (5) learner matching procedures, (6) local group dynamics, (7) pre-exchange briefings, (8) technology, (9) general organization of the course of study, and (10) prestige of target language and culture. Some teachers may even take advantage of the expected contradiction and use it as a learning opportunity for project participants to explore. In the real world, many contradictions may not be easy to identify in advance, especially when two icebergs of culture collide under the surface. In such cases, teachers might provide context-specific guidance to minimize conflicts for the sake of smooth interactions, if possible.

There can be as many ways to handle a contradiction as there are different contexts. In this study, we could have taken several approaches to, for example, the rule component: assigning different topics, letting the participants decide their topics, or encouraging them to engage in off-topic interactions. If off-topic interactions were encouraged, Hikari and Toru would not have experienced a discomfort by not following the rule, but they may have gone through a different kind of issue which may have been more serious or almost unnoticeable. If there is no way at all to avoid a contradiction, teachers' constant, in-depth reflection on each component constituting an activity system and its relationship with neighboring activity systems is key to a successful telecollaborative project.

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