The Ugly Duckling Tale: 
Open Task for Gifted Learner in Regular High School 

Gracia Sudargo 
Liberal Arts Department 
Pelita Harapan University, Surabaya 

As presented in Access: The UP-DECL 
Centennial and 2nd Philippine International English Language Conference on 17 September 2010 at 
Pasay City Philippines 

Abstract: 
This is a short paper to narrate writer’s personal reflection about teaching gifted learner in regular high school. The paper is not meant to lecture or teach anybody; instead it is an attempt to empower others in their teaching. Firstly, it will be opened with a short anecdote about the background of the lived experience in teaching gifted learner. Next, theories and references about gifted learner will be discussed briefly. Then discussion on open tasks in classroom as an application of SLA theories will be presented. Finally, analysis in form of narrative will be presented. 

Keywords: gifted learner, gifted underachiever, learner with special need, juvenile deliquency, task, open task, SLA. 

Prolog 
I always love spending my time with young teenagers. That is why I accepted the job to teach English in my old senior high school with great delight. I expected meeting learners with many faces, many styles and personality, and rich of experiences, but I never thought I would encounter such a learner.

It was a hot afternoon. I got my chance to teach X B in the sixth period. It was right after their PE class. Before teaching their class, I had seen them exercising roughly on the school field below. They ran, jumped, and sweated hardly. I bet it was very tiring for them. The learners had gotten fifteen minutes break before they had to join my class. However, many of them were still sweating and busy drinking iced tea when I arrived in front of their classroom. Seeing my coming, the students jumped out of their seat, tidied up their clothes, and threw away their plastic bag.

I walked into the classroom, put my books and markers on the teacher’s desk, and then I turned to greet them. That was the moment I realized something was wrong with the class. We were supposed to have 25 students in the class, but there were only 24 students sitting on the students’ desks. Therefore I asked where the missing one was. Simultaneously they gave me the same answer by pointing to the floor at the back of the class. I did not understand what they meant at first, so I walked to the back side of the classroom. It was my first moment seeing him.

He was a dark skinned boy, not too tall, with spiky hair. His white uniform was not worn properly; you could see the edge of his shirt coming out of his grey trousers. Even his grey trousers were stone washed and torn in some parts such as knees and ankle. There were some drops of sweat, or water, I was not sure, on his face. He was closing his eyes, breathed regularly, and stretched his body on the floor. In fact, he was sleeping, right on the floor of the classroom, during lesson hour.

Thousands of different emotion flooded into my mind. I was surprised, angry, felt pitiful, and challenged at the same time. However, the biggest question was; what should I do?

Learners with Behavioural Difficulties 
Teachers called him a catastrophe, his friends did not know what to do with him, and many educators labelled him as learner with behavioural difficulty. There are some descriptions on behavioural difficulties. Rienert prefers to use ‘learner in conflict’ to describe it. It is not a euphemism since those learners are having unsatisfactory relationships—which lead to conflict— with parents, siblings, teachers, peers, and also the educational program they experience.

Rosenberg (2004) states that actually the term ‘behaviour disorders’ is the same with the term ‘emotional disturbance’. However, there should be some explanation in defining these words. He quotes from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997) that the term means a condition where someone for a long period of time experience inability to learn, to maintain relationships, to control mood and behaviour, which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, and health reasons.

A learner’s behaviour becomes problem when such behaviour is essentially age inappropriate or interfering in the learner’s adjustment and learning process. Such behaviour also becomes a problem when it interfere other’s lives. (Kirk, 1972) Casey (1981) adds that a learner’s behaviour becomes problem when it draws criticism and bad attention to the learner personally.

Psychologists and educationist from all denomination agree that during the first five years of a learner’s life, the physical, cognitive, and affective construction of the learner are developed.

“Family milieu play a vital part in determining a learner’s behavioural adjustment,... Consistent, loving care and a secure environment provide the base from which the learner can venture into independent behaviour,... Consistent demonstration of socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviour by parents seems to lead to the adoption of such behaviour in learner... A wide range of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours are susceptible to effective imitation and, because of this, the behaviour of parents and other care-givers is a crucial variable in the young learner’s development. (Casey, 1981: 94)
Thus, a family condition is an important factor in a learner’s behaviour. Certain behaviour difficulties can be understood better by observing the family background. Rosenberg (2004) also adds that Behaviourist believes that human behaviour is learned. Therefore, a learner learns much unacceptable behaviour from his family so that he grows up to be a learner with behaviour disorders.

Education also plays a crucial role in constructing behaviour. Actually almost all of us start going to school eagerly and enthusiastically. However, due to the different learning capability, those with lower ability begin to feel inferior. Casey (1981: 96) states that:

“The key concepts in this relationship are frustration and security-success brings security, persistent failure brings insecurity and frustration.”

Whenever a learner has consistent failure in school, he begins to feel insecure. Such feeling leads him to frustration. Frustrated learner easily tend have behaviour problems. These behaviour problems serve more consistent failure to the learner. This is a circular connection hard to break.

Quay (1969) believes there are four groups of behaviour problems; the first one is conduct disorders. Such learner is overt attention seeking, aggressive, and ill-mannered. The second problem is anxious-withdrawn. Learners with this difficulty are hypersensitive, timid, shy, and isolated. Some other learners are disinterested and regressive, they are categorized in the third group; inadequate immature. The last category is the member of antisocial groups, that is socialized delinquent.

On the other hand, Rosenberg (2004) proposes a different kind of approach. Rather than discussing this disorder in general, he prefers to perceive specific patterns and bring the discussion on each specific topic. Those topics are hyperactivity, aggression, social withdrawal, juvenile delinquency, and severe behavioural disorders.

Let us name him Dan. He was not a timid boy; in fact he was quite destructive in class. He was, as Quay terms such learner as is overt attention seeking, aggressive, and ill-mannered. Thus, in Quay’s category, he was the first type. In Rosenberg’s, he was a learner with juvenile delinquency. Rosenberg defines juvenile delinquency as any acts of juvenile misconduct or behaviour, both legally forbidden and hidden delinquency. Hidden delinquency is the large numbers of teenagers who are engaged in acts of lawbreaking behaviour but remain undetected. I saw Dan sometimes speeding his motorcycle on road with high speed. I also knew from friends that he joined illegal racing every Saturday in certain spot. I even saw signals of smoking habit in his physical appearance. He quarrelled with other teachers, given bad marks, and even ran away from home. In short, Dan was a learner with hidden delinquency in status offenses. Rosenberg differentiates status offense from criminal offense by drawing a line between legal laws violation and noncriminal action. It means status offense is only illegal for juveniles but not for adults, such as smoking, illegal racing, alcohol, etc. in certain points, Dan matched the criterion of juvenile delinquency categories. He was a male learner, as Rosenberg says more male than female are engaged in juvenile delinquency. However, he did not match other correlations. He did not come from a broken home family, not from low socioeconomic status, and not with low IQ. Once, I heard a reference about Dan from his junior high school that he had succeeded finishing an IQ test with pretty high score. My prejudice about Dan became blurred, I was confused. I could not understand this young boy. That was the moment I heard about gifted underachievers.

**Gifted Learner**

The term gifted itself, according to Gallagher (1975), is very broad. There are various ranges of abilities and personalities, as great as what we can find randomly in selection of teenagers. Thus, it is not meaningful for teachers to agree on one singular pint of view in discussing the social abilities and emotional adjustment of gifted learners since they vary so widely in characteristics.

However, to make our stand point clear, we need some explanation on the term ‘gifted’. Often, people view gifted learners as eccentric, introverted, bespectled and weedy has absolutely no relationship with reality. In fact, gifted learners in classrooms go under our eyes unrecognized. They represent a variety of talents, personalities, and physiques. Not all gifted learners are strong and healthy. Not all of them are good in mathematics, not all of them are the first rack in our classes, and even not all of them are our favourite students. Bowd (1990) prefers to define gifted to include learners who show consistently remarkable performance in any worthwhile endeavour. This includes not only general intellectual areas such as language, mathematics, and physics, but also music, arts, creative writing, drama activities, and social behaviour.

Despite of many definitions and characteristics attributing a gifted learner, most researchers and theorists agree to Van Tiel (2007) emphasizing the significance of creativity in marking a gifted learner. She says that that creativity holds a very important role in a gifted learner’s life. In other words, a gifted learner must show that he or she is creative in the field he or she masters. No one could become creative in every field, or becoming gifted in all life dimensions, but they can be gifted in certain areas. Researches show that people with high creativity are gifted, but people with high intelligence are not always creative.

Once, I decided to triangulate my diagnosis on Dan’s personality. I intentionally brought into his class a set of materials for levels above him. I asked them to do an IELTS material designed by Cambridge for university students. It was a 40 numbers reading comprehension check with advanced reading materials. I myself found it quite challenging for university students. Thus, I asked the students to do 15 numbers only in half an hour. Then we checked them. Most of the average students could do 5 out of fifteen numbers correctly in those 30 minutes. Students with high academic achievement succeeded 10 out of 15. I saw Dan finished earlier than everybody. He stopped working after 10 minutes. So I asked him if he had finished. Dan said yes and continued his own business. I intentionally did not forbid him; I wanted to know his capability. What I got was beyond my expectation. It really made me trembled. Dan – who used to sleep in classes, ignored teachers, refused to do homework, and even preferred to do other activities whole his teachers were teaching – gave me 14 correct answers out of 15, notably that he finished them in 10 minutes. I fell speechless on teacher’s desk.

**Understanding Gifted Underachievers**

A huge question appeared in my mind; why did he get so low scores? Gallagher categorizes gifted underachievers as learners with achievement below what we would predict based on their IQ. Gallagher (1975: 342) says:

“Children who are chronic underachievers, who seem to perform below their intellectual aptitude year every year, provide a most frustrating problem for the
teacher... Such youngsters often give teachers a vague feeling of frustration and failure. They hint that somehow they will flower intellectually of the teachers only know the right buttons to push.”

Researches show that negative attitudes of underachieving learners, both gifted and not, are closely related to family attitudes and values. Especially, according to Gallagher (1975), role of a father plays a very crucial role for the life of a boy. He says that when a father is more punitive in relationship with his son, the son tends to show disturbances in academic area.

I remember one afternoon when I had a small talk with Dan. I asked about his family, what his father did, and how he communicated with his mother. He explained to me that he had runaway from house for several months. When I asked why, he shook his head and said “My dad.” I found out that he had a huge quarrel with his father several months ago, his father forced him to be a good diligent boy and often used rod to exemplify his meaning. Dan resisted against him and decided to move out from home. Feeling pitiful, Dan’s mother placed him in another empty house and visited him regularly. Still, Dan refused to see his father until now.

Gallagher (1975: 344) adds: “In the case of gifted children, as well as that of other children, who fail to make proper identification with adults because the model (i.e. the father or mother) is unacceptable to them for various reasons, they must find other models of behaviour. Where are they go to for their values? It seems they often turn to their peer group and band together with other dissatisfied youngsters of similar background.”

These teenagers do not have difficulties in finding friends, and as a result do not appear as isolates in sociometric analysis as any other stereotyped gifted. However, often teachers might wish they were isolates, since their choice of friends seems to result in social gank that tends to base their activities in excitement seeking, negative attitude toward school, violation and rebellion against adult codes and standard. Low achieving boys feel less accepted by their families, become more aggressive and destructive in their behaviour, and generally more defensive. Gallagher explains that their portrayal of world is a portrait of unfriendly and unsympathetic place. This attitude apparently comes up from their attitude toward their family. Shortly speaking, Gallagher (1975) summarizes, these learners, reacting to their parents’ unfriendly attitude toward them, are hesitant to accept values of family and society.

Dan had a close friend in class. They used to hang out together. They even spend a lot of racing nights and smoked together. However, Dan was a popular boy. Many girls liked him. In class, when we were having serious discussion, every time Dan splashed out some jokes, everybody would laugh. Even, sometimes he would perform any unpredictable actions in front of the class such as coming up to me and holding my hand as if he was proposing. It made the students broke into laughter and became distracted from the main subject. In short, anything Dan did was an attraction for his friends.

Task for Gifted Learner

Basically there are two kinds of tasks for learner in language acquisition, they are open task and closed task. Ellis (1994: 598) explains:

“An open task is one where participants know there is no predetermined solution; examples include free conversation, debate, ranking activities, and suggesting preferred solutions to problems. A closed task requires the participants to reach a single, correct solution or one of a small, finite set of correct solutions.”

Since Dan is a gifted learner who was headstrong and creative, I believe open task play more significant role in his language acquisition. Unfortunately, such open task seems not very common and popular for teachers in local context. Thus, our discussion will focus more on open tasks in Dan’s class.

Senior (2006) suggests teachers to assign capable students with special tasks inspiring their classmates. Senior believes that indeed there are some typical leaders we can find in our classes. They naturally can influence their classmates, both in positive and negative way. Through giving them responsibility to help their classmates learn, teachers can promote motivation on such headstrong students and direct their energy on positive way.

One day I wanted to give listening assessment in Dan’s class. Yet I only had the written script of the dialogues and comprehension questions based on the dialogues. I could have used to set as a reading assessment. However, I though I could employ something different. I called Dan to come to the front. I gave him a copy of the script, and then I distributed the questions to the whole class. I explained o the entire class that we were going to have a listening assessment without audio tape. Dan, who would sit in front of the class, would help me to replace the function of audio set. The class broke in laughter; they commented that Dan would read the dialogues in funny Javanese accent, or that they could not understand Javanese English. In short they doubt Dan’s capability to help me in English.

Dan pulled a chair and sat beside me. Then together, I and Dan read the dialogues out loud to enact the dialogues as if we were using audio in listening class. To our amazement, he read them so excellently. His pronunciation was a combination of natural fluency and beautiful accentuation. He read the words as if they were gorgeous carving from the Dark Age. Often he would move his sight from the paper and looked at me instead of the script without missing the line. I had to admit I really enjoyed enacting the script with him. When we finished reading the first dialogue, everybody stared at him, amazed.

Many people consider output as the production or the result of acquisition. However, Ellis (1994) explains about the role of comprehensible output in language acquisition. Learners need opportunity for meaningful use of their linguistic resources to reach full grammatical competence. When learners experience the chance to produce utterance, their output may become more precise, coherent, and appropriate. Thus, output is not only the result of acquisition. In fact, production may promote better acquisition.

It was in the middle of the first semester when I decided to have role play in our class. The students were reaching a static stage where going to school was no longer fun, the friends were no longer new, and they started to get bored easily. I distributed some scripts about fable for each group to develop. Dan’s group, consisting of five persons, got a script of Little Red Riding Hood. I gave them some lesson periods to practice and scheduled a stage performance. Each group would perform their play in front of the whole class. I knew this was going to be fun, but I did not prepare myself for what I was going to see.
We used small stage to perform the show. I wanted my students to feel like playing real drama. The Little Red Riding Hood was opened with a scene when she said good bye to her mother, then the mother got off the stage. Now Little Red Riding Hood cast had to cross the stage as if it was a forest. Dan – playing as the Wolf – sneaked on the background hunting his prey. I had to admit that Dan succeeded. He brought the audience to laughter and made them charmed at the same time.

The whole play, from the intriguing meeting between Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf until the victorious ending when the Wolf screamed out loudly for being shot, was a mixture of suspense, comedy, and blasting performance. The audience hated the scary naughty Wolf and fell in love with him at the same time. To be honest, actually the other team members did not perform something incredible, but Dan stole the whole scene and enabled his friends to enjoy this old fable.

I was quite surprised to see how Dan managed his script. The other casts did modify their dialogues, but only a small bite. On the other hand, Dan totally rebuilt his dialogues. I am not even sure that he had constructed and memorized his lines previously. His lines were so random, natural, fluent, and looked as if they were spontaneously produced.

As we can see from the discussion above, gifted learners can have various attributes and characteristics, yet they have one prominent character: creativity. Thus, promoting gifted learner’s creativity in learning English can lead us to a surprising performance. Role play is a task where learners not only acquire speaking skill but also get a chance to explore creativity. Senior (2006) suggests using role play in teaching to create activity based lessons in informal communicative classroom atmosphere.

Once, our school held a speech contest. Several schools sent their students to compete. We called two lecturers from a famous English education faculty in a nearby university. On the competition day, I was quite glad to see that Dan joined the speech contest. I found out that his homeroom teacher had asked him to contribute. Thus, I asked Dan what he would present. He smiled mysteriously and told me to wait. This increased my curiosity. In fact, I was his English teacher, but Dan getting the task in such a limited time did not ask for any help. I was really curious.

Dan’s number was a bit at the end of the contest. It meant I had to wait the entire morning to see what he would say in his speech. Only some competitors succeeded to impress the audience; one girl closed her speech with a gracious song, another boy showed his capabability by greeting us in three languages previously. His lines were so random, natural, fluent, and unassonishment. The next second, that group of students in grey and white broke in noise. They applauded, shouted, and whistled. I guessed Dan’s speech had risen up their rebellious nature.

Indeed, being rebellious in teen age is not something needs to be appreciated. Yet I had to appreciate how his homeroom teacher caught this spirit and directed it toward an achievement. During their teen age, learners hide some dangerous potent. They are in the period where rebellion is dignity. When formal instruction limits their freedom, they will spontaneously enact some protests. However, Dan’s homerson teacher was able to catch this spirit and put it under her authority to reach something greater than mere politeness between teacher and student. She invited Dan to explore to a range he had never encounter before. She let Dan to believe that he was able to do anything, not based on luck and people’s compassion, but because he could. She knew that building confidence of a gifted underachiever was extremely crucial.

This can be understood from what Gallagher (1975: 346) says:

“The belief in luck and fate, or rather bad luck, is often adopted when the individual no longer believes in himself. Building the confidence of a boy who wishes to avoid the very experiences that would bring self-confidence is a task that may well need greater professional experience and insight than is available in the classroom teacher.”

By asking Dan to join speech contest, actually the teacher was opening an opportunity for Dan to learn about a discourse which is very authentic yet never been taught in schools; oratory. Oratory is not a mere speech which is formal and well constructed. Oratory includes argumentation, reasoning, persuasive skill, and stage performance. This discourse is likely never taught in formal high schools; usually learners from English Department will encounter it in university. However, in real life learners might experience this discourse when they see a demonstration, news about campaign for election, or a movie about earlier government.

Assigning Dan this task also prompted his learning process in which he had to acquire rate of speed in learning. Dan was given this task in such a short time. He had to prepare his idea, script, and practice the performance just within a few days. Yet he managed to do it.

I would like to quote from Ellis to sum up our discussion. Fillis (1994:598) states that:

“More open-ended tasks may afford learners greater interactive freedom to practise conversational skills such as topic selection and change.”

Teaching Dan was a spectacular experience for me, yet beautiful. I learned so much to appreciate people from different backgrounds; I learn to understand people deeper than what I can see in their outer appearance. I learn that there are universal things for everybody, no matter what color their skin is, no matter how high their scores are, no matter what kind of family they have. I learn to believe that no matter whose theory we believe or what approach we prefer, love and creativity can survive in promoting acquisition.

Epilogue

This was my last day teaching in Dan’s school. On the following week the students would get their final exam before they passed to the next grade. On the coming school year, I was going to teach outside the province. I decided to spend the last day taking my students to reflect back the whole year. We used our 2 x 40 minutes to discuss about relationship, what I like
from each person, what I would like them to do as a better person.

It was really hard for me to leave this job. Especially I felt that I had close relationship with Dan’s class. We had shared special bond they had never shared with other teachers. I played some instrumental music as back sound to accompany my last speech for them. Some girls broke into tears. Tougher boys who used to make fun of every class were stuck on their own seats with wide eyes. Yet I managed not to become too emotional.

The bell almost rang. We would have to end the whole togetherness we had had this year. I had expressed my personal impression on all students, except one; Dan. I intentionally delayed my comment for him since I myself felt quite hard to find anything proper to say to him. Dan sat on the right corner at the back of the class. He had been restless during the whole hour, he moved nervously on his seat.

I did not want to cry in front of the class, but I could not avoid from saying anything to Dan. Therefore I forced myself to call his name, “Dan”. He stopped moving restlessly, lifted up his head, and stared deeply at me.

Then I said, “Dan, I am so proud of you. I am so proud of Dan who is not afraid of getting high scores. I am proud of Dan who shares his laughter with his friends. I am proud of Dan who is able to stand up on his own feet. I am proud of Dan . . .”

My voice trembled, so I had to stop talking to avoid crying. Dan bowed his head and looked down at the floor. I did not know what was in his mind. I did not want to end this class, and all we had had together. However, the clock showed the time, we were run out of time. It was time to pray as the school ritual when the class was going to be dismissed. Thus I said, “I do not want to go home and end all of this. I thank all of you for all we had had together. However, the clock showed the time, we were run out of time. It was time to pray as the school ritual when the class was going to be dismissed. Thus I said, “I do not want to go home and end all of this. I thank all of you for the love you have given to me. To close this year, Dan, would you please pray for us?” I requested proudly for being able to resist not to shed any tears.

Dan nodded slowly and closed his eyes. The whole class was sunk into silence for several seconds, and then Dan’s voice broke into our still class, chanting one of the most beautiful poem I ever heard:

“Are You there, God?
Here we are Your children...
If we could choose,
We would stop the time,
And let this moment we share freeze forever.
Are You there, God?
Here we are Your children...
We do not want to let time passes by,
And separate us from each other...
But the time runs away,
And life must go on.
Are You there, God?
Here we are Your children…”
Then I cried.

References


Biodata

Gracia Sudargo, S. S, M. Hum. is a graduate from English Letters Department of Sanata Dharma University. She attained her Master Degree in English Language Studies Graduate Program of Sanata Dharma University with a specialization in education. She is teaching as an English lecturer in Pelita Harapan University in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia.