An Insight into Incentives of Open-Ended Activities in English Language Learning

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Abstract:

In this era of curriculum reforms to include e-learning in English Language Teaching, there is a need to address methods and strategies that help learners of all abilities. Now, in these days of digitalization every student can be included in open-ended activities as everyone is provided with the opportunities of browsing the Internet by the helping hand of Technology. Teachers can interlace web-based material with the language elements through open-ended activities. In this context of differentiated curriculum the focus of the paper is twofold: (i) to illuminate the larger issue of how open-ended activities provide curricular differentiation in English class and (ii) to explore ways in which open-ended activities were put into practice in web-enabled e-class.

The paper discusses about the conceptions of open-ended activities. Then discussion spotlights the role of the activities in mixed-ability classes and it culminates by a few guidelines that help in designing the activities. It concludes with a wish that the syllabus is negotiated between learners and the teacher with - self-instruction, self-direction and individualization. Thus open-ended activities involve acquiring methodological and conceptual competence as well as the development of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills.

Key words: *open-ended activities - curricular differentiation - web-enabled e-class - mixed-ability class – autonomy*

In this era of curriculum reforms to include e-learning in English Language Teaching, there is a need to address methods and strategies that help learners of all abilities. Open-ended activities have been recommended as a means to allow students who are identified as gifted to work in their areas of interest, in their own learning styles, and at their own ability levels. Now, in these days of digitalization every student can be included in open-ended activities as every one is provided with the opportunities of browsing the Internet by the helping hand of Technology. Learners browsing for their favorite information are an asset to English class, as appropriate use of the language they go through while browsing for the matter can be made a part of the class during various language activities. Teachers can interlace such material with the language

elements through open-ended activities. In this context of differences in content for different students of a class, this paper focuses on two aspects: (a) to illuminate the larger issue of how open-ended activities provide curricular differentiation in English class and (b) to explore ways in which open-ended activities were put into practice in web-enabled e-class.

Looking at Open-Ended Activities:

The meaning of an open-ended activity is well understood from the following definitions provided by various scholars as given below:

- Open-ended problem is a problem that has several or many correct answers, and several ways to the correct answer(s).

- An open-Ended Activity aims to provide opportunity to use / learn a concept of a field while working / solving a problem of that field of study.

- An open-ended activity or situation does not have a planned ending, so it may develop in several ways.

Such activities are recommended as a means to differentiate instruction to involve every student as an active participant in improving their language skills. The main objective of an open-ended activity is differentiated curriculum. A differentiated curriculum denotes 'sets of specialized learning experiences which develop the unique abilities of students identified as gifted/talented.' Curricular differentiation strategies include making modifications in the content, process, and product domains of instruction. Many strategies suggested for curricular differentiation for identified gifted students can be found in the literature. These days of Information Technology, every student is getting exposed to a lot of information and has his/her own choice of material for improving English language. Learners have more opportunities to go through the effective use of language besides the matter in their text / reference books. Open-ended activities encourage the learners to observe the use of language beyond the class room / learning atmosphere.

Open-ended activities are suggested as a means to differentiate instruction by allowing students to work at their own rules, use their preferred learning styles, investigate their own interests, and produce work commensurate with their abilities. Teachers using this strategy could give all students the same activity, and quality of instruction, with the differentiation occurring in the children's response, reflective of their abilities and interests. Differentiating learning experiences through learner responses may be a powerful instructional strategy for maintaining both challenge and democratic principles in the class. The alignment of learner characteristics with features of their learning experiences is a fundamental principle of differentiated instruction (Shalaway, 2005; Tomlinson, 1999, 2008).

The activities accommodate a variety of content / methods of achieving activities using the target skill/s. Such activities can be manifested through differentiated curriculum. VanTassel Baska and Little's (2011) definition of A differentiated curriculum opines that it is for the gifted, one that is tailored to the needs of groups and/or individual learners that provides experiences sufficiently differentiated from the norm to justify specialized intervention, and that is delivered by a trained educator of the gifted using appropriate instructional and assessment practices to optimize learning. This definition includes content, as well as process of instruction) and product from the evaluation as integral aspects of curriculum.

Conceptions of Open-Ended Activities:

One difficulty in investigating open-ended activities is the ambiguity of the term. Open-ended activities have historically been associated with creativity training. On creativity tests such as the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1996), open-ended activities encourage the respondent to provide a number of answers to the same question, as well as unusual answers. Open-ended activities may also be associated with the divergent thinking cell in Guilford's Structure of Intellect Model (Guilford, 1967). The model expanded on various types of thinking abilities. Using Guilford's model, scholars developed open-ended activities to strengthen students' skills in the divergent production category of thinking. The principle involved in developing open-ended activities for divergent thinking is that there is no one correct answers.

Open-endedness is part of the process modification needed for identified gifted students. Open-ended implies a different teacher attitude reflected in (a) questioning technique as well as the content of questions, (b) the design of learning experiences, and (c) evaluation of student responses to questions. Thus open-ended activities go beyond the right or wrong answer issue. It involves an attitude toward total instruction, questioning techniques as well as other learning experiences, and the evaluation of students' responses. Another process modification described by Maker directly related to open-ended activities is 'freedom of choice'. She said: ' Allowing gifted students the flexibility to choose topics to study (content), methods to use in the process, and the environments to pursue them is an important method for facilitating success with other systems as well as to build upon the learning and motivational characteristics of these children.

This notion that identified gifted students have a stronger need for choices in their learning than other children is not clearly supported in the literature: 'There is widespread agreement that a student expressing interest in a topic should be encouraged to pursue it and, indeed, that the opportunity to do so promotes interest. There is no agreement that breadth is important if it means nontraditional courses. There are contrasting opinions as to who should be making choices: students, parents, or curriculum planners at local and higher levels. Richards and Gipe (1993) cited characteristics of students who are gifted as reasons why they prefer and participate in activities that provide "opportunities for self-determination and self-selection of learning experiences" Khon (1993) presented powerful evidence which supported that all students benefit

by having choices in their learning. He indicated that choices may be as subtle as where to sit, who to work with, when to do an assignment, or which assignment to do first.

Based on available research in this area, it would be difficult to conclude that open-ended activities refer to questioning techniques, they are not only proven to be beneficial for identified gifted learners (Pollack, 1988), but they are strongly advocated to be infused into higher level thinking modes for all learners (Van Tassel Baska, 1992). When open-ended activities refer to the amount of choices students have, authors differ in the populations for which they advocate their use. Although the notion of differentiation has appeared in educational literature since the 1950s (Good, 1959), it has gained greater significance and attention as the diversity of students in today's classrooms has increased. In response to this change, ASCD -Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development - (as cited in Shalaway, 2005) has described the following best practices evident in an effectively differentiated learning environment for all students:

1. Teachers and students accept and respect one another's similarities and differences.
2. Assessment is an ongoing diagnostic activity, and learning tasks are planned and adjusted based on assessment data.
3. All students participate in work that is challenging, meaningful, interesting, and engaging.
4. The teacher is primarily a coordinator of time, space, and activities rather than a provider of information.
5. Students and teachers collaborate in setting class and individual goals.
6. Students work in a variety of flexible group configurations, as well as independently.
7. Students often have choices about topics, activities, and assessment.
8. Teachers use various instructional strategies to target instruction to student needs.
9. Students are assessed in multiple ways, and each student's progress is measured at least in part from where that student began.

All these practices can be extended to the differences in material that occur with the inclusion of resources from the Internet in e-class.

Role of Open-Ended Activities in Mixed-Ability Classes:

Generally ESL class has students with mixed abilities. Two or more distinct levels of ability present in a class with the same desired level of language skills. These groups of students have different learning styles, different paces of learning, variations in motivation and varying analyzing capacities. Naturally, this is a challenge for a teacher to solve and simple solutions cannot meet such a complexity. Against this background, Eison believed that the learning process has to be successful in order to make an engagement between the students and the subject besides knowledge construction has been linked to learning, to favorable learning

experiences. To have such a strong relationship with English language, the teacher can facilitate information about the websites / bring such material to e-class that is interesting for the students of the particular class. The e-books, web pages giving information using effective language available in text, audio, video formats can be kept in the e-learning webpage of the particular class.

Learners do not get distracted from their browsing content and develop their subject besides improving their linguistic proficiency. During such collaborative learning students engage in active, deep learning are discussing, and negotiating with their peers / teachers through the options of chat / forum tools of e-learning. The social constructivist approach also believes in the knowledge constructed as one interacts with one's environments through processes of discourse, negotiation, and consensus building (Syh-Jong, 2007). Classes with students of different abilities also can participate in such activities and starts improving from one's abilities of language or communication. Teacher also responds to students according to their needs / choices of learning. Learners feel more encouraged and interact with the effective use of the language at their pace of learning. Here, teacher can differentiate learning experiences by allowing students to work at their rules, pace, use their preferred learning styles to reflect their knowledge in their favorite field of study and produce work according to their abilities.

Differences in questioning techniques as well as the content of questions, the design of learning experiences, and evaluation of student responses to questions make each student an active player in the process of learning. The teacher facilitates an environment with opportunities for students to take part in tasks. During tasks, learners are encouraged to use interesting material from the chosen field of study. Learners follow the language content and do the activity with their chosen material to achieve the target of an activity with the available resources. S/he is evaluated on the

basis of appropriate use of language elements while s/he uses the language to express his/her favorite information. In- and out-of-class exercises that include problems for solving or questions for answering can also be included for prompting students to use the language and develop thinking skills. One can examine the open-ended activity based language learning method / material need to go through the following five lenses:

Clarity of Lessons: Clarity of lessons is an asset in these activities. The Learning Ladders used by the teacher provide structure. With these the learner knows what must be done next. Each unit of information or process is broken up in such a way that clarity of the lesson is ensured. This is particularly effective for learning the fundamentals of language elements with reasoning.

Classroom Environment: The pleasant and relaxed, yet disciplined climate of the classroom is congenial to execute these activities. The use of provided material with ample choice for the learners in an e-class shows their enthusiasm while the stacking materials and in all the procedures that the learners follow. The closing of the physical and psychological distance

between teacher and the taught reflects a very satisfactory feature of the process of executing the activities in both conventional class and web-enabled e-class.

Students' Involvement in Learning Process: There is absolutely no doubt that the learners are truly engaged in the act of learning, though there could be degrees of difference among them. There is eagerness in their step and a sense of purpose in their behavior. One is left in no doubt that a feeling of mastery is the best reinforcement for the development of linguistic competence. It seems to work far better than external motivation and true meaning of internal motivation to use the best language in the activities. The best means is the best of ones abilities in using apt words, making correct sentences, and using English for communicating their ideas.

Teacher's Role: The teacher has a very important role in this system. S/he has to exercise complete authority, without becoming authoritarian. An egalitarian attitude may require some un-learning and re-learning for teachers, but when they see it as part of the new culture of education, they are quick to accept it and practice it. Some teachers may be in need of improving methods / materials and the others may be in need of familiarizing the tools of e-class. In a word, teacher becomes facilitator of information, method, material and above everything a mentor to provide emotional support while doing the activity.

Scope for Creativity: There will be some blank slots in all the ladders, for the teacher to fill up in these activities. This gives him / her opportunity for bringing in new material or for including a locally relevant theme. Clearly, there is here, recognition that knowledge is not a pre-determined set of facts. Changing perspectives, new information, the opinions of students and teachers, views of others in the community - all these can and do constitute knowledge. That there is a provision

to introduce a new item for study is to be highly commended. However, a new item is not necessarily a creative addition to the curriculum. Some special monitoring of the items filled in the blank slots would be recommended. Other ways of allowing children to be creative must be consciously introduced. The learner's understanding of open-endedness to new perceptions may not get enough emphasis, when the materials are presented as an end in themselves.

Designing of Open-Ended Activities:

It is believed that the goal of learning is construction of advanced knowledge representations in a form of mental models. The goal of Open-ended activity-based learning is for learners to construct mental models that allow for 'higher-order' performance such as applied problem solving and transfer of information and skills. New information and communication technologies make it possible to develop and deliver multimedia learning objectives for the activity-based learning. To support the design of an activity for learning, any existing learning objectives must be described not only in terms of information within it, but also in term of activities that it can support or in terms of learning artifacts that can result from these activities. Jane Wills describes

task or activity as a goal-oriented work with a clear purpose. Open-ended activity involves in achieving an outcome, creating a final product that can be appreciated by the class. He opines such an activity is a three stage process. i. Pre-task - introduction to the topic and task ii. Task cycle - task planning and report and iii. Subject focus - analysis and practice.

Learners' characteristics must be considered only after an activity is defined, in term of their learning scaffold needs rather than in term of their ability to understand content. Carefully designed sub-tasks within an activity are to take learners from one level of learning to another, from simple to complex, from lower to higher order thinking, from observation and experimentation to generalizations, application and innovation, from problem understanding to articulation of best solution. The activities can be designed and used in these five stages:

➢ Construct – to prepare a mental model of an activity that suits to the learning objective. We need to identify suitable topic, define learning objective, construct learning activity, identify learning objective, and find the necessary material to support the learning process for good construction of an activity.

➢ Produce - to obtain suitable method and material according to the mental model of the activity. Let us develop resources for achieving the objective by integrating suitable method and material in the activity.

➢ Implement - to execute the activity in the class providing suitable environment for learning. It would be better to facilitate learning experience by providing ambiance conducive for learning with self-learning techniques in the activity.

➢ Evaluate - to find the value of the activity in the process of learning / application of knowledge. Such activities can be improved further by finding the involvement, learning, and achievement of the learning objective to use it as feed back of the activity or construct of the next activity.

A few techniques are tabulated here for the ready reference of the readers to design the activities that suit to their students.

Listing	Brainstorming, fact-finding.
Ordering and Sorting	Sequencing, ranking, categorizing, classifying.

Comparing	Matching, finding similarities, finding differences.
Problem Solving	Analysing real or hypothetical situations, reasoning, and decision making.
Sharing Personal Opinions	Narrating, describing, exploring and explaining attitudes, opinions, and reactions.
Creative Tasks	Brainstorming, fact-finding, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving and many others

When we design such lessons, first the learning activity must be designed, and then a learning objective is to be designed or selected from a library of existing objectives. A learning objective is to be used within a learning activity rather than used independently from the activity. Maker and her colleagues (Maker & Nielson, 1995; Maker & Schiever, 2010) proposed a collection of principles to guide the design of curriculum for learners with high abilities; when studying in their favorite subject; many students share a wish to control pace of their learning, the topics, methods and choice of workmates.

More of the students want to learn about complex, extracurricular topics and authentic, sophisticated knowledge and the interconnections among ideas. Open-ended activities give lot of freedom for the learners in using the language as per the expectations of the teacher. It is not surprising to know that more of them does not like waiting for new material while their classmates learn what they already knew and they did not enjoy asking for help during the activities. The levels of openness in activities can be varied according to the learners of a particular class. Schwab and Herron categorize the autonomy into four levels, which can be considered during the design of activities.

LEVEL	Question / activity	Methods & Material	Answers / Solutions
O	Given	Given	Given
1	Given	Given	Open
2	Given	Open	Open

3	Open	Open	Open

A level 0 activity is one in which the teacher or lab manual decides the question or problem students will investigate, how students will do the investigation, and the validity of the investigation's results. Students make few decisions-other than deciding whether they got the "right answers." A level 3 activity represents the other extreme. Students decide what to achieve, how to achieve, and how to interpret the results they achieved.

In summary, the quality of responses was based on arbitrary criteria, contextual for each open-ended activity. The quality of responses was indicative of differences in students' abilities. In most cases where the products of the activities are written responses expect the learners to use language skills such as mechanics of writing, vocabulary, grammar and other aspects of communication and abilities of organizing thoughts. In cases where the products are spoken responses expect the learners to use their spontaneity, apt vocabulary and elements of proper pronunciation and expression. Reading and listening can also be integrated in activities while they work in groups or individually when they gather needed information and using the information in the activities. To put the idea in nut shell, the role of the activities is providing autonomy to learners which means making use of the capacity of being responsible for own learning process with the help of the available resources. In such situation, the syllabus is negotiated between learners and the teacher with - Self-instruction, Self-direction and Individualization. Thus open-ended activities involve acquiring methodological and conceptual competence as well as the development of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills.

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