

TEACHING ENGLISH TO STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS: CHALLENGES AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The current study aims at shedding light on the challenges that might be confronted while teaching English to students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and providing remedial teaching strategies that can facilitate teaching English to these special learners. Helping students to achieve their highest potential requires both an understanding of ASD and its characteristics, and the elements of successful program planning required addressing them. Students with ASD are individuals who each has unique strengths and needs. Thus, via analysing the previous literature about the topic and administering a structured questionnaire to twelve (12) English teachers at the University of El-Oued, Algeria investigating the challenges and the teaching strategies that can be used to remedy these challenges, this study attempts to provide a broad lines for a special English syllabus that best meet the needs of students with ASD.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders (ASD), challenge, ELT, syllabus, teaching strategy

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Education plays a crucial role in every individual life. Hence, equality and equity in education needs should be strengthened and supported to satisfy the need of giving attention and care to students with special needs. The recognition of this type of learners has been increasing significantly worldwide and in Algeria. The better understanding as well as designing supportive educational programs are urgently needed for learners with special needs (Ni Nyoman & Luh, 2019, p. 159).

One type of students with special needs is the student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which is observed to be increasing in Algeria. Autism belongs to the diagnostic category named pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs). It is a complex development disability resulting from neurological disorders which negatively affects brain function and is four (4) times more common in men than in women. This disorder adversely affects areas as social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and imagination (Kerrel, 2010, p. 19).

Learners with ASD have troubles with the following: executive functions, theory of mind, and central coherence. Such students also have trouble with sensory processing. Loud sounds, strong smells, uncomfortable seats, and bright lights will prove to be a great distraction and will have a negative impact on learning. Essentially, ASD is a social relational disorder, and it is important to note that university teachers will usually encounter high functioning students with ASD (Lybarger-Monson, 2017).

In the Algerian context, education policy makers resorted to inclusion policy. Inclusion can be defined as the practice of including students with disabilities alongside with other students in a regular classroom (Gilhool, 1989). Inclusion can be described as including students of different conditions, backgrounds and abilities to be in the same classroom. Thus, special need students frequently discovered in a regular classroom are diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorders. Learners with ASD require special attention and care.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, EFL teachers usually encounter difficulties in teaching students with ASD. The academic year 2020-2021 is remarked by the attendance of two (2) students with ASD to the Department of English, at the University of El-Oued, Algeria. With the adoption of inclusion classes, EFL teachers

should adapt themselves with this critical teaching situation via adopting effective teaching strategies that respond to the psychological and academic needs of this type of learners.

The current study aims at shedding light on the challenges that EFL teachers face while teaching students with ASD, and investigating the appropriate teaching strategies to students with autistic spectrum disorder included in regular classrooms. To achieve these aims, the study attempted to answer the following key questions:

- (1) What challenges do teachers face accommodating learners with ASD in the mainstream classroom?
- (2) What are the academic lacks and needs of students with ASD?
- (3) What are the effective teaching strategies that can be adopted to meet the psychological and academic needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

Literature Review

Features Associated with ASD

Every person with ASD is unique. However, some characteristics are considered important in the diagnosis. These features fall into four (4) main types (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2003):

- Communication
- Social interaction
- Behavior
- Learning

Other characteristics of behavior and learning of students with ASD can be categorized as:

- Unusual patterns of attention
- Unusual responses to sensory stimuli
- Anxiety

All learners with ASD experience language and communication difficulties. They may seem caught up in a private world in which communication is unimportant. This preoccupation is not intentional, but rather an inability to communicate. On the other

hand, language difficulties may include: difficulties with understanding and using non-verbal communication, repetitive and idiosyncratic speech patterns, echolalic speech; that is, immediate or delayed literal repetition of the speech of others, tendency to perseverate on a topic, that is continually discuss one topic and have difficulty shifting to other topics, difficulty with pragmatics of conversations, and difficulty with language comprehension. All these language features may challenge and face EFL teachers while teaching students with ASD. Therefore, EFL teachers are invited to use effective teaching strategies that facilitate coping with these hinders and lead to healthy teaching and learning atmosphere.

Learners with ASD often demonstrate unusual and distinctive behaviors. Many of the odd behaviors associated with ASD may be caused by factors such as hyper-sensitivity or hypo-sensitivity to sensory simulation, difficulties in understanding social situations and difficulties with changes in routine, all of which may lead to anxiety. Thus, when planning instruction, EFL teachers need to consider the problematic behavior and its function for that particular students in order to manage these challenging behaviors (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2003).

Teaching Strategies for Accommodating Learners with ASD in Inclusive Classroom Settings

According to Bogdashina (2004), being a participant in a normal life gives learners with ASD the opportunity to be included members of the learning process. Teaching English language to learners with ASD may seem to be a controversial idea. Language instruction should be tailored to learners with ASD needs which are in most situations very individualized. Every language teaching context offered to learners with ASD should be carefully planned after thorough investigation of the learners' preferences (Alicja & Marta, 2019).

Students with ASD are special and their uniqueness requires explicit need for teachers to identify individualized approaches to aid them achieve their academic goals (Mayton, et al., 2010; Accardo, 2015). Among the effective teaching strategies for learners with autism is the differentiated instruction. It is the instruction provided to students based on the different needs of the students in the classroom. Implementing a

differentiating classroom is challenging. However, its benefit is therefore being able to provide learning opportunities to all students in an inclusive classroom (Ford, 2013).

Under the umbrella of differentiated instruction, EFL teachers can use ICTs tools, mainly audiovisual aids in presenting different teaching materials to satisfy ASD learners' needs. It is proved that students with ASD are visual learners (Gladfelter et al., 2019). Hence, using visual mediums enhance students with ASD learning, motivation, and inclusion in the mainstream classroom. Meanwhile, they facilitate teaching this type of learners with special needs.

Method

Description of the Research Method

The current study located itself in an interpretivist paradigm and made use of qualitative research approach aiming at obtaining an individual, in-depth description of the experiences and attitudes of the respondents. The adopted approach involves clarifying the process of interpreting data and analyzing what the participants say in order to understand and describe their meanings.

The study adopted qualitative research method as its aim is to provide rich descriptions of psychological phenomena, as the case of this study. Besides, qualitative research can be inductive as opposed to quantitative research method where data is collected in order to satisfy an existing hypothesis (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Furthermore, the qualitative research approached the researcher to the data in the analysis and interpreting process.

Sampling

As stated previously, this study used the qualitative research method that implies the selection of a small size population so as to facilitate more in-depth analysis. The sample of the study was selected purposefully and included exclusively twelve (12) EFL teachers who taught the two (2) students with ASD at the Department of English, University of El-Oued, Algeria. As far as the profile of the participants is concerned, nine (9) teachers were males and three (3) were females whose experience in teaching is more than five years.

Data Collection Tool

To achieve the aims of the study, a structured questionnaire was administered to twelve (12) EFL teachers at the Department of English, University of El-Oued, Algeria during the academic year 2020 - 2021. The data collection instrument is made up of three (3) sections, each includes four (4) elements accompanied with choices for the answers. Section one is devoted to tracing the challenges that can be confronted by EFL teachers to accommodate learners with ASD in the mainstream class. The second section is dedicated to the psychological and academic lacks and needs of students with autism spectrum disorder. Finally, the third axis sheds light on the teaching strategies that can be utilized to meet learners with ASD psychological and academic needs.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Below in **Table 2** the results obtained from teachers' questionnaire are presented. The findings of the study demonstrated that EFL teachers agreed upon the idea that teaching students with ASD is a hard task that requires placing them in special classes under the supervision of a psychologist. All the respondents (100 %) asserted that lack of professional training to deal with and teach learners with ASD hinders meeting ASD students' academic and psychological wants.

The results have also shown that a great proportion of the participants (91.66%) highlighted deficits in communication and social interaction, and difficulties in establishing relationships with teachers and classmates as the key challenges that encounter EFL teachers to accommodate ASD students in the mainstream classroom.

Table 2

Results of teachers' questionnaire

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Axis 1: Challenges for accommodating learners with ASD in the mainstream classroom.			
1. Learners with ASD should study in special classes under the supervision of a psychologist.	83.33%	16.66%	00%
2. Students with ASD demonstrate qualitative differences in social interaction and often have	91.66%	08.33%	00%

difficulty in establishing relationships.			
3. Deficits in communication and language usage are seen at varied levels in students with ASD.	75 %	08.33%	16.66%
4. Lack of training of general EFL teachers to deal with this type of learners hinders meeting their psychological and academic needs.	100 %	00%	00%
Axis 2: Psychological and academic needs of ASD students.			
5. Social skill development is essential for learners with ASD.	75 %	16.66%	08.33 %
6. Effective programs for students with ASD should include comprehensive communication assessment and intervention.	66.66 %	16.66 %	16.66 %
7. Much care and attention should be given to students with ASD on the part of EFL teachers.	91.66 %	00 %	08.33 %
8. EFL teacher should note the importance of socialization, communication and language, and behavioral needs for students with ASD in the general education classroom.	83.33 %	08.33 %	08.33 %
Axis 3: Teaching strategies of learners with ASD.			
9. Learners with ASD are usually visual students do lectures should be balanced with audiovisual resources	100 %	00 %	00 %
10. Communication goals should emphasize the functional use of language and communication in various settings.	66.66 %	25 %	08.33 %
11. Peer-mediated instruction and interventions where teachers employ the use of students as instructors for students in their class can be effective in teaching learners with ASD.	58.33 %	33.33 %	08.33 %
12. It is best to present teaching materials in multiple formats (video, audio, and written) to address any student with ASD along with those who may also have learning disabilities.	75 %	16.66 %	08.33 %

The results demonstrated that (75 %) of the participants said that social skill development is one of the crucial academic and psychological need of learners with ASD as it paves the way to language teaching and learning in a healthy atmosphere. Additionally, 91.66 % of the participants in the study that EFL teachers should give much care and attention to the students with ASD in their classes. Furthermore, EFL teachers agreed, with a percentage of 83.33 %, that socialization, communication and language, and behavioral needs for students with ASD in the general education classroom should be given much importance as a part of the central needs of learners with ASD.

Finally, according to the answers received from EFL teachers recommended the use of audiovisual resources to present lectures as students with ASD are visual learners. They also emphasized presenting teaching materials relying on multiple formats (video, audio, and written) to address students with ASD together with other types of learners with special needs. Much details about the findings of the study are demonstrated in **Table 2** above.

Recommendations and Pedagogical Implications

As far as the targeted learners are concerned, the study recommends the use of visual aids as perceived by their EFL teachers. Relevant to this, Büyük, Nizam, Akgül, and Murcu (2019) state that learners with autism learn best through visuals and pictures since they are more drawn to them. Social Stories is a word used in relation to kids with autism .In their research, Ghanouni et al. (2018) noted that social stories play a function as a teaching strategy that facilitates the understanding of the social context that a student can find challenging to interpret, which results in a better learning process for them. Social storytelling can help with comprehending social circumstances, determining other people's viewpoints, and modeling proper behavior. Early intervention, according to Satari et al. (2020), is essential for students with autism in order to help them grasp fundamental skills that are acceptable and suited to their needs.

On the ground of the findings of the study, the following key recommendations are made to guarantee the smooth accommodation of students with ASD in EFL classrooms. Firstly, the current study stresses the necessity of providing training to EFL teachers in inclusive education settings. This in-service professional development

program should focus on developing EFL teachers' skills and knowledge to cope with learners with special needs in general, and learners with ASD in particular. Additionally, collaboration and coordination between Social Sciences Department and the other universities' departments including English Department in providing logistic aid through psychologists to accompany EFL teachers in teaching learners with ASD can be crucial in responding to the different needs of this type of students. The research has shown that the learner with ASD required the support of a number of specialists, including psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and remedial teachers. Furthermore, team meetings should occur frequently to involve parents and allow for open communication between and among all team members so as to provide the necessary support. Finally, EFL teachers should have sufficient understanding of the specific needs of the learners with ASD in order to accurately support them in the classroom settings. They should strive to continuously update themselves on the academic needs of students with ASD.

Conclusion

The number of students with ASD are increasing at an alarming rate. Hence, addressing this type of learners' academic needs will enhance accommodating them in EFL classroom settings. EFL teachers experience many challenges, such as managing inappropriate behaviors and addressing the individualized needs and supports of students with ASD. Hence, they should receive adequate in-service training to cope with these barriers and address these challenges.

From the explanation above, it can be inferred that the choice to use visual media as the primary medium for instructions has taken into account the tendency of ASD students to be visual learners. The success and motivation of the ASD student in learning the English language has been seen to be significantly impacted by the use of visual media in individualized instruction. This effect was enhanced by the employment of the buddy program, visual support, and co-teaching technique in inclusive classrooms (providing a model of how to behave and act, particularly in matters pertaining to extracurricular activities). By using visual aids or other forms of media, teachers can better capture and hold the student's attention. Besides, the information is presented in a way that the learner can easily repeat. Additionally, the visual aids provide verbal

information clarification and a concrete means of internalizing abstract ideas like cause and effect or sequence. The consistency of the visual information gives the ASD student the necessary amount of time to detach, change, and refocus their attention. As a result, the student's visual interpretation skills appear to be far better than his auditory performance, and he appears to understand what he sees better than what he hears. Even while ASD students are excellent at word identification and phonics, their socialization and reading comprehension skills are still below average. This is probably just how having an autism spectrum disorder would affect him throughout his life.

In the light of the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the tendency of ASD learners to be visual learners should be accommodated by using audiovisual aids in English language teaching. The use of ICTs, and in particular, visual media is beneficial and has an impact on the motivation and success of learners with ASD in English language learning.

It is clear from the findings that teachers and students with autism experience difficulties that need to be considered by relevant parties when it comes to the teaching and learning processes. According to Khowaja et al. (2019), the American Psychiatric Association defined autism spectrum disorder. They claim that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological condition that can make it difficult for a youngster to communicate with others or exhibit a pattern of repetitive or constrained activities. According to Buyuk et al. (2019), social stories can help learners with autism better grasp social situations, infer other people's viewpoints, and exhibit acceptable behavior. Along with that, it is anticipated that a created module made up of social stories and graphics will aid to raise the motivation and interest of language learners with autism. Notbohm (2005) acknowledged that autism is a highly complicated condition and that individuals with autism do differ from one another in terms of their behaviors and preferences. Additionally, another characteristic of students with autism is that they pick things up through repetition (Skewes et al., 2020).

The researcher hopes that the findings and the recommendations of this study will be used to develop an adequate educational and psychological program for learners with ASD that satisfies their wants and needs.

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