

DIDACTICS



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Teaching English to Primary Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Case Study

Abstract. Nowadays, the identification of learners with special needs is proliferating worldwide. One of these is the increasing prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) among children. The study's primary goal was to investigate the major challenges and obstacles that foreign language teachers face when teaching English to gifted language ASD students, as well as effective teaching practices that can be adapted to address the psychosocial and intellectual needs of autistic learners in English lessons. The research material was collected through a case study conducted on an English teacher and a gifted ASD English learner participating in an individual teaching program of English at a selected primary school in Poland. The findings of the study reveal that teaching itself is extremely multi-faceted, with numerous critical tasks and challenges that teachers must face. However, in the case of students with special needs, teachers' roles become even more important and cannot be underestimated. The study outcome can serve as a key factor in providing remedies for teaching English, particularly to talented students with ASD.

Keywords: Autism, teaching process, linguistically gifted students, English language acquisition

1. Introduction

Neurodiversity is becoming more obvious in many aspects of life today. Its essence is a distinct approach to brain development, related modes of experiencing the world, and interpersonal relationships at school, university, and professional life. This diversity is caused by a variety of reasons, both genetic and environmental. The understanding of ASD-related illnesses and symptoms is constantly expanding. In recent years, a particularly significant problem in the school environment has been the integration of

kids with special educational needs, especially children with autism (Olechnowicz and Wiktorowich, 2012; Prokopiak, 2014; Domagała-Zyśk, 2020).

According to Johnson (2005) and Skewes, Kemp, and Hohwy (2020) understanding ASD is complex and controversial. Autism Spectrum Disorder can be difficult even for professionals to treat. In the educational setting, English language teachers frequently lack the essential skills and training to handle the issues experienced by ASD pupils properly. Language teachers must create and implement effective educational programs consistent with the school curriculum and meet the needs of ASD pupils.

Children with ASD may have a wide range of English language skills, from impeccable grammar and speaking to complete silence. Deficits in students with ASD can impair all or partial aspects of English language use. Most importantly, language training for students with ASD should be tailored to their specific requirements. To properly teach foreign languages to ASD learners, it is important to respect their preferences (Pisula, E., Płatos, M., Banasiak, A., Danielewicz, D., Gosztyła, T., Podgórska-Jachnik, D., Pyszkowska, A., Rumińska, A., Winczura, B., (2024)).

The current study aims to identify challenges that EFL teachers experience when teaching ASD elementary students who are gifted in learning English as well as investigate effective teaching strategies for these students. The study sought to respond to the following essential questions:

(RQ1) What are the primary hurdles and obstacles that foreign language teachers encounter when teaching English to gifted language ASD students?

(RQ2) What are the educational gaps and needs of gifted ASD students in English schools?

(RQ3) What effective teaching methods may foreign language teachers use to meet the psychosocial and intellectual needs of autistic students in English classes?

2. Inclusive education – key assumptions

Inclusive education is an educational approach that seeks to accommodate all students, regardless of their physical, cognitive, social, or linguistic differences, within mainstream classrooms. This model emphasizes the removal of barriers to learning, ensuring that every student has equitable access to educational opportunities and can participate fully in the school environment. Inclusive education is founded on several key assumptions that guide its implementation and practice (Jury et al., 2022):

1. **Presumption of competence:** All students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, are capable of learning and contributing meaningfully to the classroom environment. This assumption challenges preconceived notions about students' potential and emphasizes the importance of high expectations for every learner.
2. **Right to participate in general education:** Students with disabilities have the inherent right to be educated alongside their non-disabled peers in general educa-

tion settings. This principle is rooted in the belief that inclusive environments provide equitable learning opportunities and foster social integration.

3. Diversity of the learning environment: The inclusion of students with diverse abilities and backgrounds enhances the educational experience for all students. Exposure to a wide range of perspectives and experiences promotes empathy, collaboration, and a deeper understanding of the world.
4. Need for support and resources: Effective inclusive education requires adequate support, including specialized instructional strategies, assistive technologies, and collaborative teaching models. Providing these resources ensures that all students can access the curriculum and participate fully in classroom activities.
5. Collaboration among educators: Inclusive education necessitates ongoing collaboration between general and special education teachers, support staff, families, and the community. This teamwork ensures that diverse student needs are met through shared expertise and coordinated efforts.

Recent studies have explored various aspects of inclusive education. Jury et al. (2022) investigated teachers' concerns about inclusive education and their attitudes toward its implementation. The research identified primary concerns related to resources, workload, and the perceived difficulties of inclusive practices. These concerns were found to significantly influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Poikola et al., (2024) highlighted that students' views are crucial in identifying barriers and facilitators to inclusion, emphasizing the need for student-centered approaches in educational research and practice. Sandra and Kurniawati (2020) explored the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers when teaching students with ASD and provided remedial teaching strategies to facilitate their learning. The research emphasizes the importance of understanding ASD characteristics and implementing successful program planning to address these challenges. Houghton and Fitzgerald (2023) investigated the role of teachers in supporting students with ASD in inclusive classrooms. The study found that teachers who received specialized training on autism were better equipped to provide targeted support. Effective strategies included differentiated instruction, the use of visual aids, and fostering peer relationships to improve social skills. Teachers also emphasized the importance of collaboration with special education staff. Lee and Kim (2023) examined recent strategies for teaching students with autism in inclusive classrooms. They highlighted the importance of individualized education plans (IEPs), the use of technology to support communication, and fostering a supportive school environment. The study also discusses the role of classroom peers in supporting students with autism, finding that structured peer interaction programs led to better social outcomes for students. Salazar and McArthur (2023) found that students with ASD often struggle with language acquisition but benefit from the use of visual aids, repetition, and clear structure. The research also identified key teaching practices that enhance engagement, such as allowing for sensory breaks and providing consistent routines. Jordan and Pearson (2023) outlined various strategies employed by primary school teachers to include students with ASD in regular classrooms. It emphasizes the importance of fostering an inclusive classroom

culture where differences are celebrated. The study found that the use of peer mentoring, social skills training, and teaching strategies adapted to the needs of individual students helped in improving both social and academic outcomes.

The studies reviewed provide valuable insights into inclusive education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly in the context of teaching English. A common theme across these studies is the crucial role of teacher attitudes, training, and the implementation of tailored strategies to support students with ASD in inclusive classrooms.

The studies emphasize that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion significantly impact their ability to support students with ASD effectively. Teachers who receive specialized training on autism spectrum disorders and inclusive education practices are better equipped to create supportive, accessible environments for all students, as seen in studies by Jury et al. (2022) and Houghton and Fitzgerald (2023). Additionally, research indicates that strategies such as differentiated instruction, visual aids, structured routines, and social skills training are vital for improving engagement and learning outcomes for students with ASD. These strategies foster better communication, reduce anxiety, and enhance social interaction, as highlighted by Salazar and McArthur (2023) and Lee and Kim (2023). Furthermore, the studies consistently point out the positive effects of inclusive education on both academic and social outcomes for students with ASD. By integrating students into general education settings with appropriate support, they benefit from peer relationships, role modeling, and greater opportunities for learning and personal development, research by Jordan and Pearson (2023) and others further suggests that inclusive classrooms provide an enriching environment where ASD students can thrive socially and academically.

3. Characteristics of students with an ASD diagnosis

Education is an extremely vital component of everyone's lives. As a result, equality and justice in the educational environment should be strengthened and encouraged to satisfy the demand for giving attention and care to children with special needs, including students with ASD. Furthermore, better understanding and implementation of supportive educational programs is crucial for students with unique needs.

Domagała-Zyśk (2020) argues that there is no universally applicable paradigm of inclusive education for autistic pupils due to their unique needs. Apart from autistic children, most educational contexts include other pupils in the class who have partial or permanent special or additional educational needs due to various illnesses, difficult family situations, or learning difficulties. Thus, Domagała-Zyśk (2020) adds that teachers in diverse classrooms struggle to plan lessons that meet the educational needs of all children. Teachers can only arrange classes so that every student gets the most out of them, which is made feasible by the introduction of Universal Learning Design (ULD) or Universal Design for Instruction (UDI).

Endal et al. (2013) stated that one of the potential solutions to remedy difficulties in the process of teaching ASD students and reach their full potential is differentiated instruction. Such a kind of instruction with active participation from both teachers and students addresses the unique needs, abilities, and learning styles of ASD learners. Moreover, Kristiana and Widayanti (2013) concluded that educating students with unique needs, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder, can be tough for teachers due to a lack of fundamental knowledge of autism and efficient educational support for pupils with this condition.

Furthermore, according to Lybarger-Monson (2017) and Beardon (2019), learners with ASD typically struggle with executive processes, theory of mind, central coherence, and sensory processing. Numerous unsettling variables may hamper the learning process, such as loud sounds, strong scents, uncomfortable seats, and bright lighting. Additionally, Prokopiak's (2014) and Beardon's (2019) research prove that every ASD student faces language and communication difficulties. The inadequacies can appear as trouble reading nonverbal communication, recurrent speaking patterns, or echolalic speech. More specifically, the symptoms may include immediate or delayed verbatim copying of others' speech, trouble switching between topics, challenges with conversational pragmatics, and language comprehension problems.

Sandra and Kurniawati (2020) in their research on English teachers' views on the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English to students with ASD, indicated that EFL teachers used differentiated content resources to teach English to students with ASD, prepared various lesson assignments for students with ASD and their instructions were tailored to the pupils' needs, talents, and learning styles. Language barriers may make it difficult to teach EFL students with ASD. EFL teachers should utilize effective teaching strategies to overcome hurdles and build a positive learning environment while keeping autism-related concerns in mind.

4. Challenges in Teaching English to Students with ASD

Teaching English to primary students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents unique challenges and opportunities. Recent research has focused on identifying effective strategies to enhance language acquisition and social skills in this population. Teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents several challenges that require targeted strategies to support their learning. One significant difficulty is the variation in the severity and nature of ASD across individuals, which results in diverse learning needs and behaviors. Some students may have advanced cognitive skills but struggle with communication, while others may experience challenges with both cognitive processing and social interaction (Zachor et al., 2023). This makes it difficult for teachers to apply one-size-fits-all methods, necessitating individualized approaches. Moreover, students with ASD often find it challenging to understand abstract concepts, metaphors, or idiomatic expressions commonly used in English, re-

quiring teachers to simplify language and use concrete examples (Fowler et al., 2022). Sensory sensitivities are another barrier, as these students may become overwhelmed by the typical classroom environment, including noises or visual stimuli, which can disrupt their learning (Pellicano et al., 2023). Social interaction difficulties also pose a challenge, as students with ASD may struggle to initiate or maintain conversations, which is vital for language development. Teachers must therefore create structured opportunities for peer interaction and social skills development within the classroom (Myles & Simpson, 2022). Finally, the lack of specialized training for mainstream teachers often leads to insufficient support for students with ASD, making it crucial for schools to invest in professional development and collaboration with special education staff (Charman & Pellicano, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a combination of individualized teaching, targeted social interventions, and a conducive learning environment to ensure students with ASD can thrive in English language classrooms.

5. The case study

5.1. Research design

This study is a qualitative research project. Case study research is one of the various methods for qualitative inquiry with four characteristics, namely the study of phenomena through specific occurrences; an in-depth assessment of each case; the phenomenon in its natural surroundings; and the investigation of case study participants' emic perspectives (Gall., et al., 2003). This scientific study was grounded on an interpretive paradigm and used a case study of a gifted primary student in English classes to gain an individual, rigorous account of the participant's experiences, attitudes, and learning impediments, as well as those of her English teacher. The adopted strategy was to study the difficulties and obstacles encountered when teaching English to a gifted ASD elementary student. The qualitative research approach was utilized in this study since the purpose is to provide extensive descriptions of psychological occurrences. Furthermore, qualitative research can be inductive, in which evidence is gathered to test an established hypothesis (Babbie and Mouton, 2005).

5.2. The setting and participants of the study

The study took place between September and December 2024 in one of the Polish primary schools. The case study subject was Mary (name altered), a sixth-grade student. According to one of the Psychological and Pedagogical Counseling Centers, Mary is a diagnosed ASD student who has an extraordinary linguistic talent for learning English. Mary's English teacher defines her as follows, "Mary speaks English fluently, listens to original recordings, watches films, and reads books in the original English language, and has a large vocabulary. Interestingly, she is primarily self-taught. Because of her neuroatypical temperament, the girl is not always eager

to take on given duties, becomes bored fast, and “escapes into her topics” (an exact quotation given by Mary’s English teacher). Due to her talent for learning English, she was provided an Individual English Teaching Program (two hours per week) to help her develop her exceptional language skills.

5.3. Data collection

In data collection, the researcher used various techniques: the analysis of the documentation, lesson observation, and an interview. To achieve the study’s objectives, the three mentioned scientific tools were used. The first involved an in-depth analysis of the documents (Individual English Teaching Program), the second focused on the systematic four-month inspections of English lessons (using an observation sheet), and the last one was a structured interview with the English teacher. As qualitative research requires precise information from the informants, the obtained study results were meticulously compared to answer the research questions.

5.4. Results of the research study

The undertaken analysis of the documentation was a methodical review and evaluation of both printed and electronic information about the Individual English Teaching Program. The document analysis approach, like many other qualitative research methodologies, requires evaluating and interpreting material to reveal meaning, gain knowledge, and reach a conclusion. The analysis was precisely organized to gain the required information. It involved defining two elements: the aims of the Individual English Teaching Program and the range of thematic and grammatical issues to be developed by the ASD student. The results show that the main aims of the analyzed program were:

1. Boost linguistic skills within English, that is increase efficiency in grammar, structure, phonology, semantics, etc.
2. Develop and support communication skills to enable communication on various topics and situations

Regarding the subsidiary aims, the teacher focused on providing psychological comfort, diverse teaching methods, and techniques as well as optimizing the whole teaching process. The range of thematic and grammatical issues included grammar tenses/constructions (Present Simple, Present Continuous, Past Simple, Past Continuous, ‘used to’, Present Perfect, Future Simple, ‘be going to’, passive voice, conditionals (0,1), ‘describing likes/dislikes’, and indirect questions). The vocabulary classes focused on three topics: tourism, family life, and health issues.

The lesson observation encompassed regular inspection of the English classes from September and December 2023. The observation was based on the observation sheet including five teaching and learning areas (progress, subject knowledge, behavior/enjoyment, challenges, and obstacles) marked on a four-level scale, namely excellent, good, satisfactory, and inadequate. The results of the observation show that the Eng-

lish lessons focused on all the main and subsidiary aims of the Individual Teaching Program for the ASD student. The student's progress and subject knowledge can be assessed as excellent in terms of acquiring linguistic skills, however, the communication skills were rather satisfactory (Mary was not quite eager to elaborate on varied topics). Regarding Mary's behavior and enjoyment of the English lessons, it was good as she showed a positive attitude and enthusiasm to cooperate with the teachers. However, there appeared some challenges and obstacles in the teaching progress. One of these was Mary's neuropathy, which is common in ASD youngsters. It enabled her to communicate and interact with the teacher freely. Additionally, during some lessons, Mary's mood changed very drastically, one moment she was eager to work and the next she showed reluctance to cooperate.

The interview with the English teacher included five questions, namely:

- 1) What are the most efficient learning methods/techniques to work with ASD students?
- 2) How do you motivate your students to work efficiently?
- 3) What kind of obstacles do you encounter in teaching the ASD student?
- 4) How do you approach difficulties in teaching English to ASD students?
- 5) What kind of remedies would you suggest for other English teachers working with ASD students?

The interview results show that the English teacher applied differentiated methods and techniques in the teaching process. She incorporated elements of traditional teaching, also known as the lecture-based or didactic approach, applying a method of instruction in which the teacher transmits knowledge to students through lectures, readings, or other forms of presentation. Additionally, she introduced audiovisual technology and AI tools to smoothen the whole teaching process. The foremost recommended motivational technique was a positive atmosphere in the classroom and establishing exact aim of the study process. There were some obstacles mentioned, namely Mary's neuropathy and the changing mood of the ASD student. The English teacher recommended consistency and regularity in action as well as soothing ambience.

6. Discussion of the research data

The in-depth analysis of the documents indicated that the primary objectives of the individual teaching program that aligned with the core curriculum were as follows:

- Enhancing linguistic skills in English classes;
- Providing diverse materials such as visual aids, online resources, literature, role-playing activities, grammar exercises, writing prompts, vocabulary-building activities, and collaborative learning to broaden students' knowledge of English;
- Offering various teaching methods and forms of work to optimize the learning process;

- Providing psychological comfort.
- Developing communication abilities through educational and real-life scenarios, such as global reading and language development.

The structured observation, which was conducted consistently over four months (September-December 2024), revealed that the ASD student practiced a variety of foreign language abilities. To be more specific, the student concentrated on grammar tenses/constructions (Present Simple, Present Continuous, Past Simple, Past Continuous, ‘used to’, Present Perfect, Future Simple, ‘be going to’, passive voice, conditionals (0,1), ‘describing likes/dislikes’, and indirect questions). The vocabulary classes focused on three topics: tourism, family life, and health issues. All of the aforementioned language challenges were addressed within four major language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The research supports the scientific findings of Prokopiak (2014), Beardon (2019), and Domagała-Zyśk (2020), who called for incorporating diverse tactics and techniques in educating learners with special needs.

The obtained results of the case study show several valuable guidelines for teachers teaching autistic children. As far as the primary problems and obstacles that foreign language teachers have when teaching English to gifted language ASD students (RQ1), the study outcomes show that developmental disability caused by differences in the brain disturbs the process of foreign language learning. Even though every English lesson seemed to be particularly entertaining for the ASD youngster and Mary did her best to actively participate in the lessons, she was sometimes hesitant to cooperate (e.g. she refused to do some exercises or modified the instructions given to do them her way). This calls to mind the research of Newfoundland and Labrador (2003), Prokopiak (2014), and Beardon (2019), who identified the challenges and obstacles faced by ASD pupils as being mostly caused by their surroundings and psychological issues. Although the atmosphere in the classes appeared to be pleasant and productive in terms of English development, Mary occasionally showed displeasure or a lack of passion for the English courses. It could be because of her neuropathy, which is common in ASD youngsters, or because her passion for the English language was so strong that she was continually hunting for new, different, or better linguistic stimuli. Additionally, the teacher stated that she has been taking English lessons with Mary for two years and that the experience has taught her a lot about Mary’s personality, emotional expression, reactions to various stimuli, and general preferences and needs.

Regarding the educational gaps and needs of gifted ASD students in English schools (RQ2), the scientific results indicate that the English teacher was very attentive to Mary’s educational needs and demands. She completely grasped Mary’s manner of expressing feelings, preferences, and desires. She worked hard to meet Mary’s language requirements and aspirations to the greatest extent possible. That is why, sensing Mary’s apathy in some of the English lessons, she brought a native-born friend and people from various nations (the United States, Tanzania, and Japan). She also conducted culinary workshops in English for the girl in the school’s culinary studio, created lapbooks about Mary’s favorite books, and attended outdoor classes. She also

arranged for Mary to take Japanese language classes with a native Japanese student at one of the local universities, as Mary is interested in certain aspects of Japanese culture. Finally, as part of her teaching efforts, she encouraged the girl to enter the English competition hosted by the local Chief Education Office, but Mary was unable to participate due to illness. The results of the structured interview with the English teacher provide further information about the ASD student's entire teaching process. The EFL teacher stressed the significance of socializing, communication, and behavioral demands for students with ASD in English lessons. The teacher emphasized the need to get to know the ASD learner's personality and psychological elements that influence the process of communicating with the environment.

In response to the third research question (RQ3), the findings show that the observed English language teacher was actively involved in diversifying the process of teaching English to ASD students. The teacher used a variety of approaches and techniques to help the scientific participants practice and maximize their learning experience. Regarding listening skills, the teacher focused on teaching the ASD student to grasp simple spoken statements (for example, conversations, TV/Radio messages, announcements, and instructions) that were clearly articulated in a standard variation of English. The reading material was largely made up of text fragments with individually given assignments (the British Council website source). The reading exercises were designed to educate the ASD student on how to summarize the plot, draw inferences, evaluate the text for vocabulary, and identify the central subject or themes in the work. The ASD student developed and mastered speaking skills by responding to commands, defining the main idea of statements or fragments of statements, determining the intentions of the original sender/author, determining the context of the source text (e.g. form, time, place, situation, participants), finding specific information, or distinguishing between formal and informal styles of expression. In terms of writing skills, the goal was to have the ASD student prepare simple written assignments (for example, informal letters, e-mails, text messages, postcards, inscriptions, brochures, leaflets, menus, announcements, timetables, picture stories with text, articles, narrative texts, reviews, interviews, forum and blog entries, and literary texts). The teacher was fully committed to using diverse teaching methods and techniques for different language skills. This approach to the ASD student demonstrated the teacher's extensive knowledge of the importance of providing inclusive education and its significant value in the whole process of educational and personal growth (Pisula et al. (2001), Pisula and Domagała-Zyśk (2020), and Pisula et al. (2024)).

Finally, the EFL teacher recommended employing audiovisual technologies to improve the teaching process with ASD pupils in English sessions. She stressed the use of many forms of instruction (video, audio, and written) while teaching pupils with ASD and other special needs.

7. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

According to the study, ASD students are extremely demanding in both teaching and the process of learning a foreign language. The interviewed English instructor advocates employing a variety of educational methods, particularly visual aids. This may support Büyük, Nizam, Akgül, and Murcu's (2019) assertion that ASD learners with autism learn best through images and pictures.

Furthermore, Satari et al. (2020) and Williams, Ch. (2003) emphasize the significance of early intervention for students with autism in developing sufficient fundamental foreign language skills. The current study stresses the need to train EFL teachers in inclusive education settings. This in-service professional development program seeks to provide EFL teachers with the skills and knowledge required to engage with students with special needs, namely those with ASD.

8. Limitations of the study

The study has its limitations due to internal and external validity. For these reasons, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. Despite this, the study makes valuable contributions to the body of research knowledge and has consequences for students, teachers, and curriculum designers.

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