

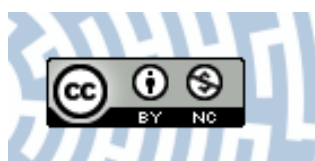


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Supporting English Language Teachers in Teaching Autistic Primary School Learners

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is the presentation of the complex problem of a lifelong developmental disorder, known as Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), in the context of inclusive education offered to these students in general, and in teaching of English as a Foreign Language in particular. First, the theories and typical symptoms of autism will be outlined, followed by examining the behaviours that enable teachers to recognise these form of disorders during lessons at school. Next we review some strategies and teaching techniques that may prove efficient and successful in the ELT classroom for both teachers and autistic students. Finally, we concentrate on the analysis of the data collected as a result of a small-scale qualitative study conducted among a group of EL teachers involved in teaching autistic learners. The study was designed with the purpose of interviewing teachers about the efficiency and successfulness of the currently recommended teaching techniques in their classrooms with ASD students.

Key words: *autism, ASD, inclusive education, special educational needs (SEN), English language teaching.*

Introduction

As defined by Thornbury (2017, p. 261), learners have special educational needs (SEN) if, “*for some physical or mental reason, they are disadvantaged and need extra or individualised attention if they are not to be excluded from the classroom learning*

experience. This is what is known as inclusive education". The scope of the potential disabilities and learning difficulties is wide and because of that it is difficult to suggest one and the same approach that will accommodate all the learners' individual needs. However, as recommended by Thornbury (2017, p. 261), there is a set of general principles that needs to be considered and followed to provide them with the best assistance. These include: working on the learner's strengths – as learners with disabilities often have strong compensating abilities; treating the learners the same way one treats other learners (e.g. appreciate success but do not over-praise); setting clear learning goals; scaffolding learning tasks; individualising learning tasks; encouraging other students to work with those with special needs; and, finally, creating a classroom atmosphere that supports diversity.

Inclusive education, which plays a prominent role in the contemporary educational system, is aimed at fulfilling the right of autistic children and young people to be active members of mainstream schools in Poland. These students' full participation in school life and in the acquisition of teaching content is possible on condition that the syllabi, as well as teaching techniques used in their instruction, are tailored and adjusted to their needs and demands. It seems that indeed although over the past few decades a great many aspects of this type of education have been named, reviewed and mastered, we still need to look for answers and solutions that will give students affected by various disorders and their parents a valuable opportunity to integrate in the class, school and the environment. However, constant reflection and the need to educate everyone involved in school life is needed, so that they can quickly and effectively recognise the special educational needs of their pupils and address these needs. It seems that some groups of teachers (e.g. pedagogy graduates) and, of course, special educators are better prepared than others in terms of substantive observation and activities. However, our concern is with foreign language teachers, who sometimes have to face the above problems without adequate preparation in foreign language teaching methodology for inclusive education. Therefore, this article also aims to provide advice for how to teach English to autistic students.

Theoretical considerations

Autism belongs to the diagnostic category called *Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs)*. According to Kerrell (2010, p. 19), this is a complex developmental disability resulting from neurological disorders that negatively affects brain function and is four times more common in men than in women. This disorder adversely affects areas such as social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and imagination. Deficits in these areas include the so-called Autistic Triad. The observable features include, among many others, repetitive

and/or unusual behaviours and limited interests. Autism usually appears in the first three years of life and is known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There are two forms of autism – severe, the so-called Kanner’s syndrome, and a mild syndrome, referred to as Asperger Syndrome. Thompson (2010) rightly notes that in assessing the situation, it should be remembered that we can talk about various types of this disorder, such as autism, atypical autism, Asperger syndrome, as well as high-functioning autism. This awareness is extremely important because it involves decisions about the entire educational path of such a student, forms of work, and scope of material. Careful reading of the full diagnosis will also be important in organising foreign language education and setting learning goals. For children with high-functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome, who are very often students who display foreign language learning abilities, these goals, forms of work, etc., will often be different than in the case of an autistic or atypical student. In addition, depending on the degree and type of disorder, education, including foreign languages, will take place in different schools/establishments – appropriate to the educational needs of these students.

According to Dahlgren and Gilberg (in Siegel, 1996), despite the fact that communication with autistic children is different from that of their typically developing (TD) peers, they are often not very unusual in their behaviour. They may have difficulty understanding oral and written information, such as following instructions or understanding what they read. However, many of the high-functioning children with Autism Spectrum Disorders are able to identify words, apply phonetic rules and understand the meaning of words. Some, moreover, have a great predisposition within various aspects of language and speech, such as sound production, vocabulary and simple grammatical structures, while showing a lack of skills in having conversations, or using speech/language (knowledge of language rules) for social purposes and in interactions. Autistic students have many strengths that can be useful in learning foreign languages, provided they are known to teachers and are skillfully used in developing the methodology for teaching these types of students. According to Mackenzie (2008, p. 20), these include: exceptional knowledge and/or skills in a given field, such as in mathematics or geography. Such special skills are seen in one in ten students with autism. Another advantage may be their considerable interest and good memory for: word strings (e.g. movie scripts), visual and spatial information (e.g. maps), music and rhythm. Other specific interests may include: interest in flags, clocks, maps, calendars, cars and trains. Wire (2005) shows that teaching foreign languages to autistic students can help alleviate the symptoms of the Autistic Triad. With reference to social interaction disorders, for instance, it seems that learning English can significantly increase

students' awareness of social skills, already at the stage of learning the expressions used to welcome and introduce interlocutors. Modelling and encouragement from the teacher and designated students can also have a beneficial effect in reducing the troubling consequences of this disorder. Another element of the autistic triad is atypical communication: too loud or gentle tone of the voice, lengthy or overly concise syntax, selective mutism, repetition of words or phrases. It is also possible to correct these impediments during foreign language classes, where developing communicative competence is one of the priorities. The potential of this school subject is the fact that all students must gradually develop and finally be able to demonstrate the ability to understand others and be understood, which can prove to be an effective tool in supporting an autistic student in learning to communicate properly with the environment in general. Such an outcome is attainable with the right amount of patient stimulation of the student by the teacher, but also by other students – classmates. Moreover, autistic students' limited adaptability can be compensated for by their preferences for procedures, memorising and repetition – activities that help to achieve success in learning a foreign language. They are useful in learning vocabulary, numerals, phraseological relationships, phatic chunks of language, grammar rules, i.e. those language aspects that give a solid basis for formulating statements, and, on the other hand, help in mastering what is for them a more demanding area in learning a foreign language – communication competence (i.e. the art of using the language correctly in relation to the interlocutor in a communication situation). Saville-Troike (2006) also states that this type of characteristic of children with autism spectrum disorders can successfully help them through foreign language education, (here, English). However, to achieve this educational goal they require that their special needs be met because they have their own specific work and response pattern.

Lumsden (2009) presents his conclusions and reflections on the introduction of French into the curriculum at the Ruchill Autism Unit in Glasgow. All of the students were of early school age. The lessons lasted 30 minutes, and the autistic students, according to the author's report, easily memorised vocabulary and facts over a week and eagerly interacted with typically developing peers. The teaching emphasised cultural aspects that aroused interest and increased the motivation of all of the surveyed students. Some of the techniques and forms of work, mainly as support in teaching vocabulary, included the use of an interactive whiteboard (IWB) and other audiovisual aids, language games based on authentic entertainment programs (e.g. *Who wants to be a Millionaire*) and a culinary meeting. At the end of the course, a trip to Paris was organised (previously, a virtual trip was organised as part of the preparation to reduce the level of anxiety that could occur in the autistic students during this type of event). According to Lumsden (2009),

the learning outcomes of the French language teaching presented here were so encouraging that the introduction of Spanish was being considered.

In the light of the theoretical considerations on the teaching of autistic children, as well as the results of some studies, one can, therefore, propose a number of tips to help teach English in a classroom with autistic students, which we present in the next part of this paper.

Students with Asperger Syndrome exhibit language skills (often from an early age) and many, additionally, have high skills and great potential for faithful copying of an accent (often the North American variety), as well as great memory. Most of them also achieve functional competence in using a foreign language – so-called phatic language, for example how to ask about health, well-being, weather etc. (Duda and Riley, 1990). These predispositions allow us conclude that autistic learners are often students who are able to make fast progress in many aspects of English. What one needs to ensure here, however, is the use of such teaching aids and forms of work that will allow them to use and explore a range of their attributes. For instance, a good exercise for practising English pronunciation would be organising a competition for recognising sounds in minimal pairs (possibly with the use of IWB software), using number-based language games, or using manual skills exercises. A good solution would also be using drama-based techniques for staging short exchanges using phatic language, but also for simple sentences and imitative speech in the form of songs and rhymes.

It should be noted that when choosing the methodology for teaching English, the tendency of students with Asperger Syndrome to monopolise class time (long, pedantic explanations/ monologues, inclusions, complaints, etc.) should be taken into account. It is therefore important to skillfully cut down their lengthy statements – if possible in English (e.g. *Thank you John/Very good John. Thanks it was great* etc.). Also, social stories with this student at the centre of the story will work in such class (e.g. *My Social Stories Book* by Gray and White, 2002). Moreover, advanced knowledge of a given subject/field (a frequent phenomenon in students with autism) can and must be used to increase the level of motivation (e.g. a short presentation on a given topic), or create opportunities to use musical, artistic and/or computer talent. Other useful tips include conducting classes according to the same routine scheme (greeting, warm-up, drills), which will have a soothing effect on the children, as the order of the stages of a given lesson will be known to them. When giving instructions and commands, it is important to use simple, rather than complex, language. Good cooperation and contact with parents of autistic students will also prove useful and effective, as they give you opportunities to emphasise the child's achievements and tactfully draw attention to existing difficulties. Addition-

ally, they can be encouraged to record material with the child at home. Finally, it is necessary to positively strengthen all good behaviours, both linguistic and social.

In teaching English to autistic students, it is worth using different forms of labelling objects (named in a foreign language – e.g. *a notebook, a pencil, a book*), and use materials with written, laminated class instructions for the teacher and the student (e.g. *Can you repeat please?; Listen to the story; I don't understand; I need help*). The ideal solution would be to prepare a framework lesson plan to be at the student's disposal in order to reduce the level of anxiety as much as possible, as this anxiety may limit these students from the use of their full potential for participation in foreign language classes.

Methodology of research

Instrument and Procedures

In order to find out the opinions of teachers who teach children with autism, a study was carried out to determine the opinions of these teachers on the efficiency and successfulness of some of the techniques described earlier in this paper as recommended in such a didactic environment, with regard to whether or not they bring about the desired educational and developmental effects when teaching students with ASD. The choice of the teachers was not easy, as not many agreed to participate in the study, and although we also posted an invitation on a Facebook site (followed and observed by over 250 teachers) dedicated to teachers of English, none of them expressed their eagerness to attend an interview.

The research problems are as follows: *1. What impact on the teaching of a child diagnosed with autism does a particular teaching technique have? Does it prove efficient and successful from the perspective of an English language teacher? What limitations if any do they have? What teaching techniques, as well as forms of classes, seem to be the most effective in the acquisition of English by autistic children in the opinion of their teachers?*

The small-scale pilot research that we elaborate on in this paper made use of interviews that were conducted among 10 English teachers of 5 primary, mainstream and inclusive public schools in and near Rzeszów. During the conversations the teachers were requested to first of all express their opinions about particular techniques and, additionally, quantify the extent of their successfulness and efficiency by choosing from the following rating descriptors: *not at all efficient or successful, very little efficient or successful, unsure of the efficiency and successfulness, efficient and successful, very efficient and successful*. All of the interviewed teachers

were female with a different number of years of experience in teaching ranging from 1.5–17. The students, as declared by the teachers, were attending the second stage of education and had an official diagnosis of autism.

Results of Research

Findings and Data Analysis

Below we present a table (Table 1) with the results obtained as a result of the interviews followed by a graphic representation (Figure 1) of the teachers' evaluation of the techniques in question for better visual presentation. We then proceed to a discussion of the obtained data, point by point, to finally reach the section with conclusions.

Table 1. The results of the interviewed teachers' evaluation of the teaching techniques suggested for use in teaching English to autistic learners

| | not at all efficient OR successful | very little efficient successful | uncertain of the efficiency | efficient and successful | very efficient and successful |
|--|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| 2. | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| 3. | 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| 4. | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| 5. | 2 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| 6. | 0 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| 7. | 0 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| 8. | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 0 |
| 9. | 3 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 10. | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Questions | | | | | |
| 1. Charades | | | | | |
| 2. Teaching English through cultural content to raise the learners' motivation and interest. | | | | | |
| 3. The use of Interactive White Board software/mobile devices/computers etc. in teaching English. | | | | | |
| 4. The use of games based on authentic programmes (e.g. Wheel of Fortune, Who wants to be a Millionaire, Cooking shows etc.) | | | | | |
| 5. Teaching pronunciation (e.g. recognising minimal pairs or imitating) | | | | | |
| 6. Teaching of phatic language | | | | | |
| 7. Drama techniques (e.g. staging short dialogues, plays, emotional states) | | | | | |
| 8. Language games based on numbers and memorisation | | | | | |
| 9. Student giving presentation on his/her extensive knowledge on some topic (a feature typical of some autistic learners) | | | | | |
| 10. Routine-based design of lessons (welcome; warm-up; drills, etc.) | | | | | |

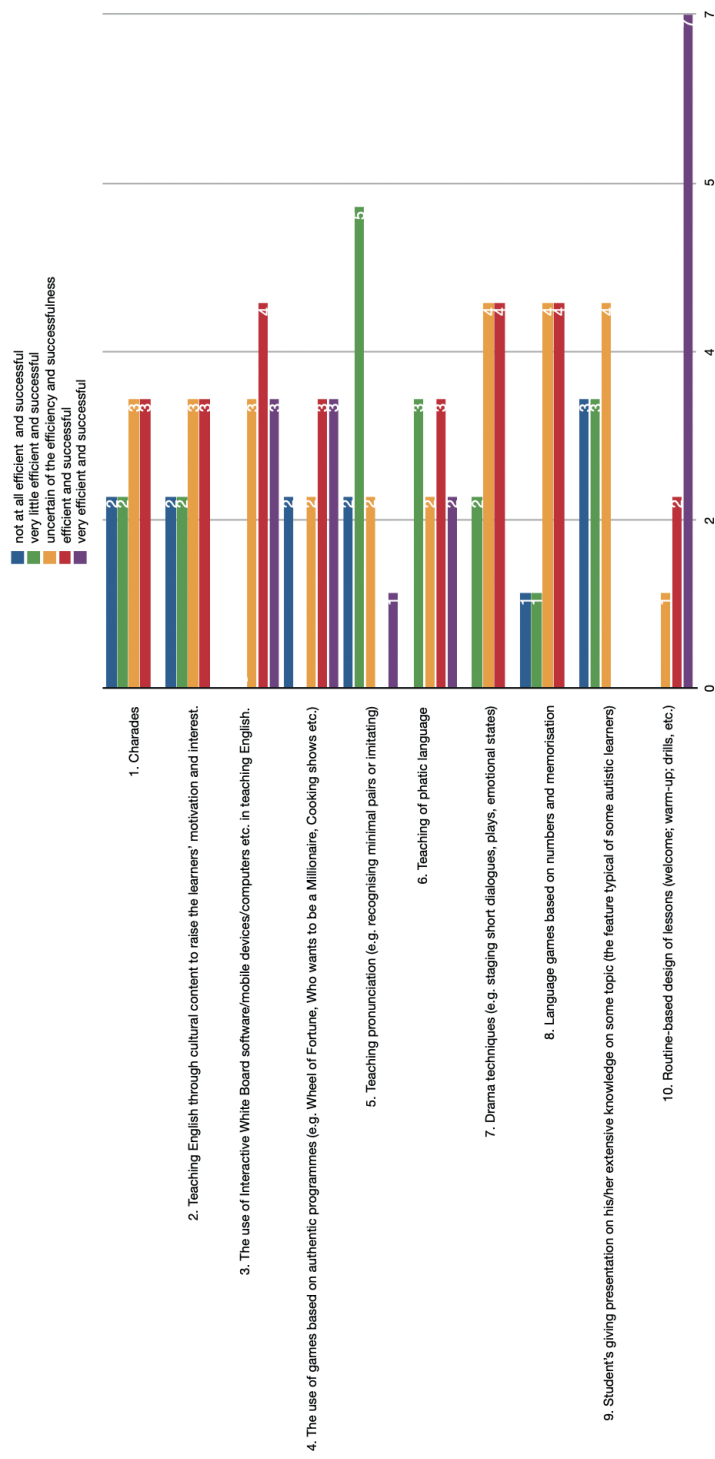


Figure 1. Graphic representation of the evaluation of the teaching techniques expressed by the interviewed teachers

As can be observed from the above, the technique with the use of charades (question 1) in teaching autistic learners does not seem to enjoy a great deal of respect from the teachers, since 20% of them regard it as not at all efficient, 20% as very not very efficient, while 30% are uncertain of its efficiency. In turn, 30% of the teachers participating in the study find it efficient and successful. As for their opinions, the most crucial ones are presented in Table 2 .

Table 2. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 1

I have applied this technique a few times, but I do not use it very often. I think that autistic students have problems with reading body language. I always need to make sure they understood correctly and there is not always time for that in the classroom.

I use these techniques because they are useful in general. Not only for autistic students. Although it is a fact that most of these students are kinaesthetic.

It helps ss [students] understand the organised material better

I have never used it

Autistic students either refuse to take part in such an activity or their motor skills and understanding of symbolic gestures are non-advanced.

I haven't tried this method yet. There's not enough time in a lesson for that.

With reference to question 2, about teaching English through cultural content to raise the learners' motivation and interest, we can note an identical result as for question 1 and we also present here the teachers' opinions in Table 3.

Table 3. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 2

We have lessons e.g. about British festivals and celebrations. Students get involved when it is connected with some DIY work e.g. while talking about Christmas in England we prepared Christmas crackers. Thematic videos and songs are also useful. It is difficult to attract and keep students' attention using the textbooks

One of my autistic students was really interested in British culture. He loved reading English newspapers and he asked me for these kinds of homework very often. It can be really helpful.

I don't use it as I believe it does not have such an effect

Yes sometimes I introduce cultural elements as it lets me base my teaching on specifics: advertisements, cartoons, songs, geographical curiosities

The lesson about Polish Independence Day attracted attention of the students, they were interested in the subjects, presented active approach.

The third question about the use of Interactive White Board software/mobile devices/computers etc. in teaching English to autistic learners shows a significantly different attitude and opinion, as 40 % of the interviewed teachers believe it can be efficient and successful, 30 % consider it to be very efficient, and 30 % are not certain of its efficiency. None of the teachers finds it very little or not at all successful when applied in the classroom. Table 4 with the teachers' views on the point confirms the fairly positive effect such techniques may have on autistic learners.

Table 4. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 3

I have applied this technique and it was useful and also efficient. Students volunteered to do the tasks on the board and found it very attractive. I used it for instance to revise vocabulary. Students are used to using different mobile devices at home and using them at school is welcomed by them.

Probably it could be useful but I do not use them very often.

Autistic ss [students] tend to be visuals they understand the material better, it helps in memorising.

Sometimes I also use these pieces of equipment. It helps me reach my autistic students by appealing to their visual and kinaesthetic needs.

I use it frequently, at almost every lesson, because the autistic students are 11 years old, male. They often refuse to take down the notes or to do simple tasks in students' workbooks but activities presented via White Board and other devices have a pivotal meaning for them, they become encouraged and engaged in a lesson. They want to take part in the activities presented on the Interactive White Board.

It's common in my lessons. Students are more focused on the subject, additional resources I have make the lesson less boring for them. Autistic students need to engage all senses to make the learning process better for them. But not too much at a time.

When it comes to the question on the use of games based on authentic programmes (e.g. *Wheel of Fortune*, *Who wants to be a Millionaire*, *Cooking shows* etc.), the teachers' opinions and evaluation seem to go in different directions – 20 % find it inefficient, 20 % remain uncertain of its successfulness, whereas the remaining 60 % evaluate it evenly as very efficient, or efficient for the classroom use with autistic learners. From the opinions presented below in Table 5, one can observe that some teachers seem to be particularly interested in this form of teaching, using numerous websites such as, for example: live worksheets, Hit the Balloon or word wall, to appeal to their students' special needs and preferences.

Table 5. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 4

Such games as the Wheel of Fortune or Millionaires were also perceived as attractive and exciting. Students eagerly took part in them. The games were played on the interactive board.

I do not have much time for using these kinds of games during the lessons, but I presume that they might be helpful.

Games help the students relax, they learn without realising they are being taught.

I have not used this technique yet.

The autistic students are very active during such games. I use 2 types of websites with games that provide practise of vocabulary and grammar. The games are the wheel of fortune, crosswords, game show similar to Who wants to be a Millionaire, Hit the balloon, Pacman etc. Other website consists of activities more similar to those in the workbooks, but still seems more interesting. The websites are: wordwall, and liveworksheets. Gamification of grammar theory or vocabulary makes them engaged and the most often the students provide good answers.

I use them only when I have extra time. Autistic sts [students] like vocabulary games

As regards the fifth technique related to teaching pronunciation (e.g. recognising minimal pairs or imitating), the tendency here is not very optimistic or positive, since as many as 70 % of the teachers participating in the interview do not favour it and find it either inefficient (20 %) or not very productive in a classroom with autistic pupils. 20 % remain uncertain and only 10 % see it as a very successful tool for teaching this group of students. The opinions presented in Table 6 seem to be in line with this ranking since, as the teachers report, the students either *do not always want to repeat after the teacher*, or display *no particular interest in this kind of activities*. One opinion, however, emphasises the fact that such learners seem to *pay more attention to this than average students*.

Table 6. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 5

I used imitating for practising pronunciation but students do not always want to repeat after the teacher. It depends on their mood and the level of tiredness

I applied this technique but with the whole group of students. I did not observe a particular interest in this kind of activities.

Yes, I sometimes use it although this method seems to be difficult especially for young children

I have not used this technique.

Autistic students try to be precise while pronouncing the words. Actually they pay more attention to this than average students.

I teach it in early stages – then we just use it in a class. Autistic students rarely use the language spontaneously

I rarely use it – not much time in a lesson. We practice pronunciation while we're reading or doing grammar exercises. I don't see anything special that autistic students would like in it.

The sixth technique in question relates to teaching phatic language, that is chunks of language rather than isolated words, and as the findings indicate the teachers' beliefs are split here, with 50 % labelling it as efficient (30 %) and very efficient (20 %), whereas another 50 % are either uncertain of its value for classroom use (20 %) or find it not at all efficient (30 %).

Some of the teachers' explanations highlight the fact that phrases and linguistic chunks are more memorable for the students and also raise their motivation to be an attentive and active learner.

Table 7. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 6

| |
|---|
| I try to speak English as much as possible during the lesson. Students memorise these phrases more easily than e.g. vocabulary from the book because they are often repeated. |
| I applied this technique. These kinds of exercises are quite easy so sometimes it can be the opportunity to motivate autistics. |
| Yes. Students memorise the whole sentences. |
| Yes I use this technique very often since I notice my autistic learners have a liking for learning expressions, and in consequence, quick language responses. |
| Students on the autistic spectrum are more interested in learning nouns than phrases. |
| I teach it in early stages – then we just use it in a class. Autistic students rarely use the language spontaneously |

Continuing the discussion of our findings, we reach the point on the usefulness of the application of drama techniques (e.g. staging short dialogues, plays, emotional states) in the foreign language education of autistic students, and the observation is that 40 % of the teachers see it as an efficient instrument, while another 40 % find it challenging to state its attractiveness for the teaching context discussed in this paper. In turn, 20 % find the technique not efficient at all. Although in the conversation about this issue some teachers give numerous examples of how they put the technique into practice (role-plays, dialogues) and that they value its attractiveness, they also express the difficulties that can be observed, such as finding a partner, and lack of eagerness to participate.

Table 8. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 7

Drama techniques which involve interaction with others often do not work. Autistic students have difficulties with cooperation with their peers, understanding emotions, role-playing. They do not cooperate well while creating dialogues and need to be encouraged and supported by the teacher all the time. In the classroom it is not always possible for the teacher offer as much as help as needed because the teacher needs to supervise other learners as well. Moreover, sometimes there are problems with finding a partner for an autistic student. It depends on how they function in the group. Autistic students easily get into conflicts during group or pairwork (especially in lower grades where students do not know each other well yet).

I use them. If they are quite easy they take part in them

Yes. Students memorise better the whole sentences.

I used the technique a lot with success.

Students were encouraged to pretend they are in a restaurant, and to behave like a real waiter and real customer (happy and dissatisfied with the menu). I noticed that average students were very eager to take part in acting, but autistic students preferred to stay and just look. They didn't understand jokes and emotions.

We learn dialogues. They usually learn them by heart.

Language games based on numbers and memorisation (question 8) are found to be efficient by 40 % of the teachers interviewed, while another 40 % are uncertain of their opinion. 20 % of the teachers find this technique to be either inefficient or not efficient at all (10 % each). As the teachers repeatedly voice in the interview, a lot depends on the individual characteristics of their autistic students and some stress that they happen to like the technique but this cannot be treated as the rule.

Table 9. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 8

It depends on the student. We play memory games and guessing games for teaching vocabulary. Some students enjoy them because they have good memory and pay attention to details so they are successful in these games.

It depends on students. One of my autistic students loved them (he was very talented one), but currently my student is not interested in it.

Yes. Students learn without realising they are being taught

I use the technique very rarely.

I haven't applied the technique yet.

I mostly use interactive vocabulary games. But I think they would be useful.

With regard to the technique that involves autistic students in giving a presentation on their extensive knowledge on some topic (a feature typical of some autistic learners), 60 % of the teachers find it to be either not at all efficient and successful (30 %) or of little value (30 %), and the remaining 40 % are uncertain of its usefulness. The teachers emphasise that despite the fact that their autistic students do display an extraordinary knowledge on some topics, the language barrier seems to be too difficult to overcome to apply this technique more frequently. Some students also tend to suffer from “stage fright” typical for public performances (opinions in Table 10).

Table 10. Citations of the teachers’ opinions on question 9

It is a useful technique but I haven’t tried it yet. The reason is because it requires quite good level of English from the student and there is not much time for that in the classroom.

I do not have time for doing it during the lesson, but sometimes I allowed them to express their thoughts or opinions e.g. about their favourite computer games or wildlife topics.

Not really, students tend to be stressed out in front of the whole classroom.

Yes. I used to teach such a boy who had a really authentic need to demonstrate his knowledge of the English language, though it was restricted to a chosen discipline: English cartoons and films, advertisements. He could recite the lyrics/texts in the original version.

I haven’t applied the technique yet.

It is useful if they like the topic or it’s in a range of their interests. Then they can do it. But in English it is mostly too hard for them and someone always helps them. I’ve never met one of my autistic students who would prepare a presentation on his/her own. Always with help. Anyway, he or she has to present that later so it’s useful somehow.

Finally, the last question pertains to the routine-based design of lessons (welcome; warm-up; drills, etc.). Here, as many as 90 % of the teachers express a high efficiency rate, with 70 % estimating it as very efficient and 20 % as efficient. Only 10 % of them are uncertain of the success that can be achieved when such a technique is applied in the classroom with autistic students. None of the teachers interviewed find this point to be either not very efficient or completely inefficient. Not surprisingly, in the conversation the teachers emphasise the high value of designing and following routine-based lesson plans, which gives autistic students a feeling of safety. The predictability of the teacher and his or her actions stirs the level of motivation to perform in activities and a low level of anxiety inspires the learner to be active and exploratory (see the comments Table 11).

Table 11. Citations of the teachers' opinions on question 10

| |
|--|
| Routine is very important and I try to have it in my classes because it gives students the feeling of safety and they know what to expect. |
| For sure the routine-based lesson are crucial. They feel safe. They hate being confused. I try to do it as much as I can. |
| Yes, students memorise better. |
| Yes I have used this approach to organising my teaching with autistic students but a lot depended on their physical and mental disposition on the day. Sometimes I didn't manage to follow my lesson as planned as my student would not focus on the didactic process. He also fell asleep or nervously hid under the desk |
| Autistic students often paid attention to details, especially the system of class management (discipline in the class). They want to be rewarded with stickers or even outperform average students. If the lesson consists of predictable parts, they are calm and try to be active, but when it is too loud, or something unpredictable happens, one of the autistic students (the Asperger's one) leaves the classroom to relax and calm down. |
| Yes. Very useful. They want a lesson to be predictable. Routine-based lesson is very helpful. Any changes need to be discussed before. |

Conclusions

In conclusion, according to Bogdashina (2004, p. 259), being a participant in so-called normal life gives autistic children the opportunity to be included members of the learning process (even if this is done merely by memory). Undertaking English language teaching to children with autism may seem to many to be a controversial idea, even among people who work with such children on a daily basis, because, what one needs to remember, it is language functions that are particularly disturbed in a given group of children with this type of disability. But taking into account the existing body of research, such as, for example, that conducted by Zaorska and Trajadowska (2013, *Does Teaching English to Autistic Children Make Sense?*), as well as some of the works referred to in the theoretical part of this paper, together with the results of the present small-scale study, it seems justified to state that a foreign language education can be delivered to this group of learners to their benefit. The language instruction, however, must be tailored to their needs, which, as this study reveals, are in most situations very individualised, and although there is a certain group of predictable expectations and special needs that such learners demonstrate, one still cannot extrapolate generalisations to a larger number of

these students. Every English language teaching context offered to autistic learners must be carefully planned after thorough investigation of the students' preferences. The techniques discussed here (which by no means exploit the full list of possibilities) and tested for the purpose of writing this research paper must be selected and tailored in such a manner that they reflect these pupils' interests and take account of their current predispositions.

All things considered, taking into consideration the small range of this study, further research needs to be developed and carried out in order to confirm or disprove some of the tendencies presented in the discussion of the findings and to search for the best practices to help teachers include these learners in the process of English language learning.

Finally, one needs to bear in mind that, as maintained by Bogdashina (2004, p. 259), most people with autism express gratitude to parents and teachers who do not exclude them from society due to their autism, by introducing corrections and compensatory strategies to help them cope with difficulties. The well-being and development of autistic children also depend on us, English language teachers, and although we are aware of all the difficulty and non-standard procedures needed to successfully include them in the group of students we teach, in the light of the above considerations, we have no doubt that many of them simply deserve our hard work and interest. The successes of this very special group of learners will for certain give us a lot of satisfaction, a sense of high self-efficacy and will enrich our teaching repertoire.

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