

Experiencing Teaching English to Learners with Exceptionalities: A case study of a ten-year-old autistic child

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Received: 29/12/2021

Accepted: 06/02/2022

Published 04/03/2022

Abstract:

The present study attempts to expose a pedagogical experience of teaching the English language to a ten-year-old boy with autism spectrum disorder at his home. The challenges and difficulties faced by the researcher in the role of teacher, in addition to those faced by the autistic child are thoroughly analysed. The outcomes demonstrate that the autistic profile of the learner features dominantly in his engagement and achievement in the learning process. Furthermore, the learning environment may have an impact on the attention of the autistic child, and thus ought to be taken into account. An unexpected result was that the case's positive attitude and curiosity towards English was a key factor in his motivation to learn.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder; English; pedagogical experience; learning environment; positive attitude.

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are social beings in essence who usually start to learn basic activities within their micro-society, that is the family. Children learn such activities from their surrounding environment, including walking, eating, and communicating. In fact, one may consider that language is the means of communication par excellence that children acquire and use in their daily interactions for the sake of expressing their needs and emotions, and establishing interpersonal relationships. Language is described by Wind Cowles (2010) as “an effortless ability that we acquire before we learn how to dress ourselves.” Indeed, it is a human faculty of paramount importance that is acquired at an early age.

Once children go to school, they learn different subjects including foreign languages, and keep enlarging their knowledge about the world in general and developing their language skills in particular. However, not all children succeed at achieving the expected learning outcomes, since some of them have special needs and may exhibit learning difficulties. Hence, the teacher may face learners with exceptionalities that would alter the whole teaching and learning experience, as in the present case study of a ten-year-old child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, which is among the most common developmental disorders. Indeed, the teacher may not “quite understand the behaviors the student displays, or what to do about them.” (Harrower et al, 2016)

The present communication is interdisciplinary in nature for it deals with the field of foreign language teaching, and with the issue of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that is preoccupying psychologists, psychotherapists, speech therapists and many parents and families. The online Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines ASD as “a range, or one of a range, of conditions, some more severe than others, that are also referred to as autism and that affect the development of social communication skills and sometimes a person’s behaviour and interests.” The proposed contribution is intended to expose a lived experience of teaching the English language by the researcher herself to an Algerian autistic child who strives to learn English, and who aspires to use this foreign language

whenever the opportunity allows. The main end view is to offer insights about the challenges and difficulties faced by both the home-schooled autistic child and the teacher of English, and how the overall process of learning and teaching proceeded according to the learner's exceptionalities.

First and foremost, the genesis of the case study emanates from a teaching opportunity suggested to me by a psychologist; she knew a mother whose autistic boy needed a teacher of English for home-schooling him. The researcher could visualise how different the experience was going to be, especially that it was her very first time to deal with a learner with ASD. This represented the initial impetus for exploring a distinct teaching and learning process experience, in hope to provide a pedagogical perspective on potential challenges and difficulties. Indeed, the latter affects the quality of life of the child and especially the learning achievements, as well as his family and his interpersonal relationships. ASD causes a deviant developmental process from the typical, normal way, and is detected via some relatively common symptoms, which are sketched by Kroncke et al (2016):

Individuals with autism struggle primarily with social communication. They often show a limited range of facial expressions and their emotions are generally not well-integrated with the content of the dialogue. They often fail to share enjoyment, interests, or emotional experiences with others. Thus, conversations with individuals on the Spectrum are often flat or awkward in nature. Individuals with ASD may use repetitive or scripted language [...] They may struggle to comprehend metaphors, idioms, jokes, or sarcasm [...] Individuals with this disability may avoid eye-contact and display sensory sensitivities or tactile-defensiveness, being highly sensitive to sights, smells, tastes, and touch. They may show significant rigidity and resist changes to familiar routines. Children with autism may display repetitive behaviors such as hand flapping, rocking, and odd finger movements.

With this end in view, the rationale of the present paper revolves around the interplay between the autistic learner's characteristics and the teacher's performance, and attempts to tackle the following questions: What

are the potential difficulties and challenges for both the teacher and the autistic learner? How does the autistic profile of the learner decide upon the teacher's performance? How can the teacher ensure the child's learning achievement?

Based on the teacher's prior knowledge about autism and the psychologist's guiding instructions, it is hypothesised that:

- The lessons are going to happen at a slow pace due to the child's attention problems.

- The teacher should use explicit language when communicating with the child, avoiding metaphors and so on.

- The lesson content must be simple in terms of the way of delivering information and the materials used.

- Attractive materials such as songs and coloured papers should be adopted in order to grab his attention and foster his motivation.

- The teacher's attentiveness with the learner's nature, personality and especially interests would have a role in the success of the learning process.

In order to shed light on the interplay between the teaching performance and the learner's specific traits, the researcher has opted for exposing her own pedagogical experience with a ten-year-old autistic boy as a case study, along with an in-depth account of the overall experience. In fact, the child was home-schooled in the afternoon once a week by the researcher herself, who is also a teacher of English. Each session lasted for about one hour and a half and took place in the child's bedroom. In hope of collecting the relevant data, a number of 25 videos were filmed under the parent's permission during five randomly selected English sessions, starting from January 2021 to May 2021 (they were filmed on 22nd January, 30th January, 6th February, 6th March and 1st May). The shortest filming was about half a minute, while the longest one lasted for about 5 minutes. The videos were carefully observed and relevant impressions and remarks were noted down by the researcher for further analysis.

The main focus of the observation was the child's verbal interaction, that is what he says or asks about, the way he responds to the teacher's questions, his moments of silence, and his interruptions of the teacher's talk.

A further aspect that the researcher took into account was his behavioural cues, that is his facial expressions, his body movements during class and his interest in the objects surrounding him. In addition to depicting the learner's verbal and behavioural features, the researcher provided her own introspection about the challenges and difficulties faced by both the autistic child and the teacher herself.

On the one hand, the struggles of the learner regarding his engagement and achievement during the learning process were fleshed out and explicated in relation to the implications of ASD. On the other hand, the teacher accounted for her struggles to understand the nature and needs of the learner, and to adapt herself accordingly and effectively in terms of the teaching method and materials used, the content of the lesson and even the way of communicating with the autistic learner. Nevertheless, the teacher made sure to find out the most appropriate method of teaching (using songs and videos for children, and coloured worksheets) which would maximize the child's reception and retention of information and grants him an amusing and secure learning experience.

2. Operational Definitions

2.1 Echolalia

It is a typical symptom to children with ASD, and it is observed in their communication in which the statement or question said to them is repeated by them meaninglessly. It may result into confusion and even impede a normal and successful flow of communication. In the case of delayed echolalia, the autistic child mentions the same utterance that was mentioned in another context at an early stage in the conversation. (Field, 2004)

2.2 Personalized Learning:

It stands for a learning process that goes along with learners' need and interests in order to promote their engagement and learning achievement. It could be employed by the teacher with the intent of serving the learner's needs, as it could be undertaken by the learner himself/herself who intervenes in his own learning process (Buckley, 2006)

2.3 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT):

It is a teaching approach which views that the ultimate objective behind learning a language is not just to develop some knowledge about the language, but to be able to communicate and interact using that language (Harmer, 2014). The approach's focal perspective is adopted in the present study, wherein the autistic child is taught in a way that provokes a communicative behaviour, such as singing along with songs and interacting with worksheets under the monitoring of the teacher.

2.4 Scaffolding:

It is a strategy invented in the 1950s by the psychologist Jerome Bruner, which refers to assisting and supporting the learner during the learning process so that they reach their full learning potential and achieve the intended learning outcomes.

2.5 Motivation:

It refers to the learner's willingness and readiness to engage in the lesson and to invest efforts for the sake of achieving positive learning achievements. Motivation is considered as the driving engine which pushes the learner towards learning.

2.6 Learning Environment:

It stands for the context in which the learning process takes place. It could be the usual traditional classroom, as it could be an outdoor place or an online context wherein the teaching and learning take place. It is argued in the online Glossary of Education Reform (2014) that "learning environments have both a direct and indirect influence on student learning, including their engagement in what is being taught, their motivation to learn, and their sense of well-being, belonging, and personal safety."

2.7 Memory:

The concept of memory is the process of retaining, recalling and retrieving information that the brain has already processed and experienced in the near (stored in the short-term memory) or remote (stored in the long-term memory) past.

2.8 Attention:

According to the online APA Dictionary of Psychology (2020), attention is "a state in which cognitive resources are focused on certain

aspects of the environment rather than on others and the central nervous system is in a state of readiness to respond to stimuli.” It is about the ability to perceive and concentrate on a certain object in the environment.

2.9 Attitude:

Bohner and Wanke (2002) define attitude as “a summary evaluation of an object or thought”. In other words, attitude denotes the opinion held, the emotion felt, and the value attributed to a certain entity after being carefully considered.

3. Results

The case study of the present communication is a ten-year-old boy from Mostaganem in Algeria, who was diagnosed with atypical autism at the age of eight. The autistic child goes to primary school and does not study with children of his age but rather with those who are 2 years younger than him. That is to say, he studies in the second grade whereas children of his age study in the fourth grade, and this is a repercussion of his retarded mental capacities and poor learning achievement. Besides, the child represents a case of virtual autism as a result of his excessive exposure to screens since a very early age. Not only he watches television for long hours, but he especially spends much time playing video games such as ‘GTA 5’ and ‘Free Fire’. His addictive behaviour regarding video games caused him to fall into social isolation and meagre interpersonal interaction with his environment. A further remark is that the autistic boy had suffered from language delay and could use language till the age of five.

We came up with pertinent observations and remarks which are closely related to the concepts mentioned in the theoretical part. The boy represented the main symptoms of ASD including memory issues, frequent distractions and attention struggles, inter alia. The overall experience exhibited difficulties as well as challenges for both the learner and teacher, but it was not devoid of fruitful outcomes and positive impressions. Hence, the following account is a detailed description of the case study along with concrete illustrations selected from the videos that were filmed during the lessons, and from the notes taken by the researcher in the role of teacher.

3.1 Learning Difficulties:

The primary difficulty that the learner demonstrated has to do with memory. His retention of new vocabulary was considerably weak especially when he is not interested in that new vocabulary. He happens to ask about how to name certain things in English, but once the teacher teaches him the English word, he forgets about it. The teacher tried to adapt to his forgetful moments and repeat the new words several times for helping him to remember them.

A further learning problem was related to phonetics. In fact, he got confused with words that have a similar pronunciation such as first syllable in ‘Tuesday’ and ‘Thursday’. Consequently, he could not distinguish between them although we made several attempts using songs and writing. In addition, he mispronounces the sound ‘th’ like in ‘Thursday’ and pronounces it as ‘f’ despite the teacher’s repetitive correction. It could be assumed that the intervention of a speech therapist would be helpful.

Careful observation of the videos reveals the child’s short attention span. On the one hand, he interrupts the teacher’s explanation with questions, usually about how to name a certain object in English, which he thought about and which does not necessarily appear in the learning environment. On the other hand, the teacher observed that the autistic child gets distracted very easily, especially by minor details or small objects such as a pen cap, or even by remote sounds, namely the song of the house’s intercom. Sometimes, the child goes silent for a moment and does not follow the lesson at all, or goes silent after hearing a question from the teacher, leaving the latter in a state of confusion about whether he knows the answer but does not want to talk or he does not know the answer at all.

Furthermore, he recalls some statements which have nothing to do with the lesson content and mentions them, causing an abrupt break in the flow of the lesson. The most repetitive statement is “so my name does not change?”, and he keeps repeating it each now and then even if he gets a convincing response from the teacher. Based on the aforementioned comments and repetitive issues, one may consider that the case’s specific symptoms, namely echolalia and delayed echolalia impacted his learning process and caused the teacher to go through certain challenges.

3.2 Teaching Challenges:

The experience lived with the case was full of communicative and interactional challenges. First, the case happens to answer a question with the same question and fails to respond properly, for example: replying to the teacher's "how are you?" with another "how are you?". This makes the communication quite difficult, especially that the teacher cannot tell what is really going on in the child's mind. Furthermore, the learner interrupts the teacher's talk or responds to her questions with unexpected other questions about how to name certain things in English. Despite the fact that his avid curiosity is appreciated, those interruptions tend to leave the teacher wondering about whether the child was listening at all.

The way of dealing with the situation had to be clever in a manner that prevents those sorts of unwanted digressions, and the main strategy was to give him a condition: "I'll tell you the word if you answer me first." It can be hard to convince him about certain things, such as the 'AD' issue. In fact, the child, whose name is Adam, thinks that he should be called 'A.D', which he must have seen in a video game. His first reaction to the teacher's correction was not very welcoming, see a little aggressive, because he thought that the name 'Adam' does not exist in the English language. It was even apparent in his facial expression (he looked disturbed and frustrated). Therefore, the teacher made him listen to his correct name through an English dictionary, which seemed to have convinced him. Ironically, he usually uttered "so my name does not change" in the midst of lessons. In addition to these communicative challenges, the teacher did not find the learning environment very supportive.

3.3 Downfalls of the learning environment:

The main aspect that was not so much appreciated by the teacher is the setting in which the lessons took place. The idea is that the learning environment cannot be neglected or taken for granted since it has an impact on the learner's attention. The lessons took place in the child's bedroom, which contained two beds, a large television, a play station along with many CDs, two moving chairs and a desk with three drawers and many copybooks and books on it. Given the child's tendency to move during the

lesson, the moving chair facilitated it for him, which impelled the teacher to give regular remarks to the child so that he stops moving. Indeed, the teacher considers the moving chair a source of distraction for the autistic child, and a potential factor in lowering his engagement level.

A further source of distraction which is clearly shown in the videos is the pile of books and copybooks on the desk. According to the teacher's observation, the child's attention was strongly driven towards those books and copybooks because of their multiple colours and different sizes, though the desk was fairly large. Besides, any copybook or book which was torn, or with a crumpled cover represented a source of distraction to the child, and that is why the teacher had to make sure to tidy them up and keep away any other appealing object (key, cable, ...etc). Unfortunately, it was not enough since the child had three drawers in front of him to open and explore. The teacher did her best to urge the child to focus on the lesson and on the English worksheets that are put on the desk.

3.4 Personalized learning:

The teacher's attempt was to facilitate the learning process for the child by concretizing the content of the lesson as far as his lived context is concerned. One example is based on the teacher's knowledge that the autistic child has got four brothers. Thus, the teacher played a video on family members so that he learns family vocabulary (mom, dad, brother, sister...etc). Then, the child was asked about the number of his brothers and their names. This was a way to make him introduce them, count them, and refer to the notion of brotherhood that is part of his lived reality.

A further learning situation evoked by the teacher was through a coloured worksheet about daily routines, as shown in appendices. It contained several pictures of a little boy doing daily activities (having breakfast, going to school, playing with friends...etc). The worksheet was backed up by a video for the sake of exploiting both the auditory and visual memories. The following step was to elicit information from him about his daily routine, and he was responsive and enumerated the activities that he does. Clearly, his responses were scaffolded by the teacher where necessary.

Therefore, the content of the lessons was not randomly chosen, but

rather carefully selected based on the child's needs and interests. The fact of adapting to the autistic child entailed making the English language accessible to him by referring to people, objects, or activities that are part of his environment and experienced reality. Moreover, the teacher used to ask him for feedback, saying: "do you like the song? Are you happy? And the child responded usually with "yeah". Non-verbal cues that reflected his satisfaction and excitement included body language (stronger movements while sitting on the chair and singing with an educational song), facial expressions (his eyes being wide open with a smile of excitement) and voice (stronger with a higher tone). Thus, personalized learning along with regular feedback ensured that the child enjoyed the lesson content. Succeeding to grasp and retain most of the information is an indicator that personalized learning resulted in fostering learning achievement and engagement.

3.5 Positive outcomes:

Fortunately, the overall experience was characterised by the child's enjoyable moments. The fact that he learned with songs and was given some freedom to choose what to sing was satisfying to him; he felt secure and was not reluctant to express his desire to learn such and such thing. To illustrate, he asked for doing a mathematical operation using numbers in English, and he looked satisfied with the activity of counting and adding. Subsequently, it was observed that he has a special numerical way of perceiving things. To exemplify, in the lesson where he was taught 'the days of the week', he started counting them.

What was noticed by the teacher is the child's positive attitude towards the target language. The main indicator was his eagerness to learn new words in English. He showed curiosity and avidity for new vocabulary and kept asking questions despite his tendency to forget the words instantly. Overall, his positive attitude towards the target language made him collaborative and willing to learn and use English whenever possible. Indeed, teachers cannot make an interesting lesson on their own, because learners' intrinsic motivation is the driving engine which makes them engaged in the learning process.

4. CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the provided account of the case study, one may conclude that the autistic profile of the learner features dominantly in the learning experience and achievement, and the overall teaching and learning process. Thus, teaching an autistic child requires background knowledge about the underlying characteristics of the case, and not just knowledge about the subject matter or methods of teaching. Thus, we recommend that teachers of English or any other subject matter need to do a formation and practical training in order to get acquainted with the nature of autistic children and learn how to deal with them more effectively. Furthermore, the most relevant approach is personalized learning, which invites the teacher to serve the needs of the autistic children, address them in a simple and explicit manner, and adapt to their capacities and weaknesses.

Opting for a simple setting in terms of colours and the surrounding objects keeps autistic learners safe from having their attention distracted. A further suggestion is that the teacher needs to use attractive, fun and colourful materials in order to maximize learners' attention span. Moreover, autistic learners are prone to be misunderstood, which is why it is important for the teacher to empathize with them and be patient, attentive, to adapt to their specific condition. The teacher needs to be flexible and vary the teaching performance from friendly to authoritative depending on the learner's behaviour. Last but not least, the overall experience of teaching a learner with exceptionalities was unique and it has contributed positively to the teacher's professional development.

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6. Appendices

