

Children on The Spectrum: Their Odyssey of Language Learning

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Abstract

Language learning is considered as one of the essentials in the life development and growth of an individual. As for typical learners, English language acquisition process varies depending on the learners' preferences and styles. Whereas, children on the Autism Spectrum Disorder apparently has different styles and routines of learning. There have been many past literatures on the language learning styles of normal learners but not much on the journey of Autism children's language learning. Due to that, this study describes a reflective journey of a fieldwork in two Autism Centres. Observations were conducted to investigate the learning style of learners on the spectrum, or also known as children with Autism. This study highlights the environment condition of the centres, the facilities provided and the journey of their learning process. Further interview session was also conducted with the Operational Therapists at the centre for depth understanding of the children on the spectrum's life and journey.

Keywords: Autism Children, Autism Spectrum Disorder, ESL Learning, Language Learning.

Introduction

English language is considered as the language of today's modern world (Bashori et al., 2022; Rao, 2019; Elaish et al., 2019,). English language consists of four main skills which are listening, reading, speaking and writing. Currently, the power to master English language has become prominent. However, language learning is a complex process that requires several stages of language acquisition and learning. Each and every learner has to encounter different processes and phases in acquiring a language, especially in English language learning. Acquiring the four main skills takes exposure and thorough practices. Typical learners learn and acquire English language differently depending on their learning preferences and styles. Different learners have different styles and preferences of learning English language in order for them to develop their language learning (Chanderan & Hashim, 2022; Hashim et al., 2018).

However, unlike the typical learners, the variety of learning preferences would differ among learners with autism.

Education plays a big role in the life of every individual. It is believed that it is crucial for every learner to receive quality and equity in education. There are numerous researches done and attention given to improving students' English language learning. However, there has not been much focus given on helping learners with learning disabilities in English language learning. According to Posar & Visconti (2022), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a group of neuro developmental disorders where the affected individual or learners fail to develop adequate skills for communication, social interaction and ability to integrate the information from all senses. They might have severe impairment in social communication and also restricted repetitive behaviours. Their conditions require special attention and approaches in assisting the learners with autism to acquire English language skills. Nigmatullina et al (2023) have found out that the utilisation of technology based intervention has become a platform for learners with autism to develop their overall quality of life.

Padmadewi (2017) previously in her study on teaching English to a student with autism in regular classroom in Indonesia mentioned that ASD learners require special attention and focus. This group of learners is less likely to be more participative during the lesson. They are also less likely to understand and comprehend certain tasks or lessons given to them which making it to be necessary for other strategies to be implemented in supporting them to acquire English language or even focus during the lesson. Padmadewi also emphasised in her study that presenting the message through visual supports or media would be one of the best strategies in helping these ASD learners with their learning process. The visual or media supports will be able to help them to get further clarification of the message given to them. In this present study, the researchers intend to investigate the journey of children with autism in English language learning. Due to the lack of literature on this area, it is high time research on the language learning journey of children with autism be conducted.

In conjunction to this, this paper intends to achieve a few objectives which are:

1. To describe a reflective journey of a fieldwork in two Autism Centres.
2. To investigate the learning style of learners on the spectrum, or also known as children with Autism.
3. To highlight the environment condition of the centers, the facilities provided, as well as the journey of their learning process.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Their Journey in Language Learning

Prior to the fieldwork, review of past literatures on the process of language learning among the ASD learners' were conducted. Researchers have also attended a brief workshop and talk given by an Autism Lab Coordinator. Researchers were briefly exposed to the conditions and behaviours, also characteristics of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) children. Then, the fieldwork to the Autism Centres were conducted. Two days were spared for the fieldwork.

During the fieldwork, researchers have been exposed to the environment of the centres, including the facilities and the children along with their learning objectives. At the first Autism Centre, a tour around the centre was provided by the Autism Lab Coordinator. Researchers were told that every one of the children on the spectrum have different characteristics and each one of them reacts or responds differently towards external exposure. It is crucial to be aware of characteristics of the children with autism as some might be sensitive towards sounds, lights and etc. There, researchers were also informed that each of the children has their own learning objectives and their own learning materials as they

usually do not prefer to share. One of the other main reasons is because due to the fact that their differences in abilities that make it crucial for them to have a distinctive learning objectives depending on their progress and development. These children are mostly visual learners and they tend to learn better through pictures and images. Padmadewi (2017) concurs with this notion as stating that visual or media supports do help in making them to focus more on the messages educators intend to convey. These children do listen to instructions. However, a proper introduction is very much needed when it comes to introducing them to new things or something that is to be considered as strangers. Educators or operational therapists usually make use of social stories as part of the lessons.



Figure 1 : The learner's study space.

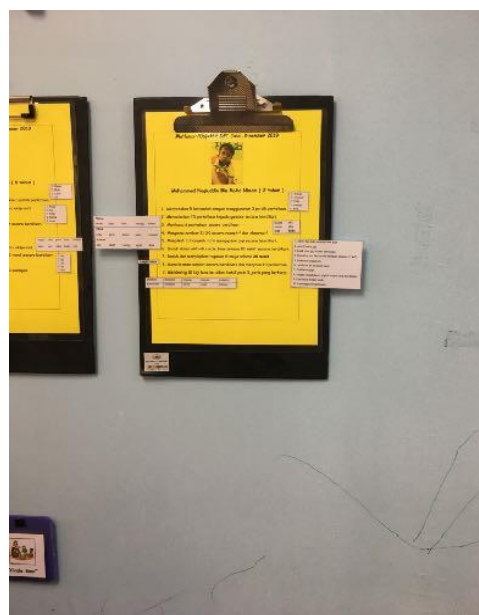


Figure 2 : The learner's individual learning objectives.

The second day of the fieldwork, a visit to another Autism Centre was conducted. Researchers were brought around the centre by the operational therapists on duty. A brief explanation was given to the researchers regarding the behaviours and characteristics of children with Autism along with the procedures they applied. According to the operational therapists, these children usually practice learning by routines. They are comfortable with doing things in repetition and take that as their daily routines. This specific centre provides a service of assessing their clients in prior to them being admitted to the centre. The assessment consists of an assessment tool called as 'Short Sensory Profile'. This particular assessment is crucial in identifying the children's sensory modulation whether they are hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity towards external exposure.



Figure 3 : The consultation room at the centre.



Figure 4 : Their physical education room

Implications and Conclusion

Given the opportunities and exposure given to conduct a fieldwork to the two Autism Centres, it is gained that learners who are affected by the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) definitely learn differently from the typical learners. It takes great challenges and patience for both educators and parents in handling these children. These children can be quite challenging to handle as their conditions will sometimes cause them to throw tantrums and not willing to participate in the lessons conducted by the educators. The findings of this study demonstrate how the journey of these children with autism are quite intriguing and worth telling. Their behaviours and conditions do not make them to deserve less than the typical learners. As a matter of fact, the findings of this study have implied that these learners have their own specialty regardless of their condition. All it takes are only the right approaches and methods to help bridging the gap between them and the normal learners.

Contributions

The results revealed that learning English vocabulary can be difficult for kids with autism. The peculiar characteristics of mildly autistic children and the lack of appropriate teaching and learning resources for them to learn English vocabulary are two of the largest obstacles to their successful acquisition of the language. Children with autism vary greatly from one another and everyone has unique personality traits. Their tastes and passions differ from one another. Therefore, it is impossible to generalise when it comes to accommodating autistic children during the teaching and learning process. Since every child with autism is unique, it is very hard to generalise about autism or those who have it.

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