

Evaluating the ability of an ESOL institution to include learners on the autism spectrum

Introduction

According to the National Autistic Society (2017) autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way the brain processes information. People with autism share three main areas of developmental difficulty. The difficulties affect people with autism in different ways and are highlighted as social and emotional struggles, processing language and communication, and imagination flexibility. Some people with autism are able to live relatively 'everyday lives' and others may require a lifetime of specialist support. Autism is one of five Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) that also include higher functioning Autism, Asperger's Disorder, Rett's Disorder and PDD not specified. Frith (2003) declares autism is a mental condition that may be present from birth and possibly caused by a number of physical factors, including genetics. It is estimated that 700,000 people in the UK have traits of autism. National Autistic Society (2017) suggest that there is a one in ten chance a child has some traits of autism. People with autism may find learning very challenging due to their learning disability. Educational establishments have a responsibility to support learners with autism by providing autism friendly classrooms. Teachers have a duty to use interventions for learners with autism to support their learning, which would create opportunities for greater achievements. The reality of autism in an ESOL department is addressed in this assignment. The nature of autism is examined and the ability of an ESOL department to include learners on the autism spectrum is investigated. The challenges that autism presents

in an educational setting and the strategies used by ESOL teachers to support learners with autism are highlighted. A summary of autism is given in a form of a conclusion. The assignment will refer to National Autistic Society (2017) as NAS (2017).

Nature of Autism

NAS (2017) suggest the causes of autism are still being explored. States News Service (2012) interviewed Jonathan L. Sebat, Ph.D. who discovered that a mass of genes related to autism transform more frequently than average genes. The transformation of the more frequent genes are called 'mutation hotspots' (alteration activity) which increase the risk for developing autism spectrum disorders.

Mychildwithoutlimits.org (2017) declares that the cause of autism is still uncertain but there may be multiple causes. The possible causes include genes that have been affected by the environment and family genetics. Chemical imbalances, viruses or a lack of oxygen at birth may be the environmental factors that cause autism. The mother having German measles (Rubella) during pregnancy, a genetic disorder that causes tumours to grow in the brain and other vital organs (tuberous sclerosis), an inherited intellectual disability (fragile X syndrome), brain inflammation (encephalitis) and when the body lacks an enzyme needed for metabolism (untreated phenylketonuria) may be the genetic factors that cause autism. NAS (2017) report that the physical factors which affect the brain development of multiple genes and their interaction with environmental factors may be the cause of autism. MacDonald et al. (2017) suggest that the autism spectrum disorder is one of the most frequent neuro-developmental disorders in children. Learners who are on the autism

spectrum have shortfalls in social communicative skills, monotonous or stereotyped behaviours. Deisher and Doan (2015) declare 4% of children with autism have genetically inherited the condition from other family members. Autism experts suggest that there is no single cause of autism and may be caused by genetic factors. Lawson (2011) highlights autism as a 'diffability' developmental difference rather than a disability and refers to autism as 'diffability', as learners with autism develop differently and are capable of learning with the correct interventions. Research done by the NAS (2017) suggests that there is no cure for autism but interventions are available for individuals on the autism spectrum.

NAS (2017) suggests autism may be 'treatable' but not 'curable'. Interventions may be used to help learners with autism overcome learning development. Bilaver et al (2015) suggest that learners with autism use interventions in education to help their developmental needs. The interventions include speech therapy, social skills training, occupational therapy and behavioural changes. To include parents in the involvement of the goals and strategies would enhance learner progression. The strategies and goals could be used by the parents to help reduce the stress levels in the learners with autism and simplify the skills being learnt for different settings and occasions. Research conducted by Devescovi et al. (2016) suggest that early diagnostic and intervention could positively influence a structured support for learners with autism. Support could enhance progress, reduce pressure and stress upon the child, and limit the incidence of abnormal behaviours. Abnormal behaviours usually occur when learners with autism have an uncertainty over what is expected from them or they have a communications breakdown. Connor (2003) suggests that children with autism could be included in the classroom when the strategies provide

a clear structure and set daily routines for the learners. Visual timetable and picture boards enable learners to check for tasks that need to be covered and inform learners of changes to activities in advance. Other interventions include repeating instructions, presenting ideas including visual, peer modelling, etc., specific teaching and practising of social skills such as turn taking and theory of mind skills, minimising distractions and exploring the use of computer-based learning and word processing. An ESOL department uses strategies similar to those used for teaching learners with autism.

The ability of an ESOL department to include learners on the Autism spectrum

Shaw and Hughes (2006) suggest that ESOL courses are an access for all types of learners including learners with developmental disorders. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA 2001) declares that education providers have a duty to treat non-disabled learners and learners with disabilities equally. Staff are required to provide reasonable adjustments for a learner who is likely to be at a considerable disadvantage in relation to a learner who is not disabled. Shaw and Hughes (2006) express that 'access ESOL for all' courses provide teachers with skills to foster a learning environment that encourages learners to respond to the learning needs.

ESOL teachers use creativity and support learners with difficulties to achieve targets. The ESOL department encourages ESOL learning by displaying visuals around the classroom to help learners understand and use words, pictures and sentences independently. Learners with autism are able to use the visuals to increase learning

development. Learners with autism have the opportunity to develop their language and communication skills.

Benwell (2017) suggests that learners with autism may have additional difficulty in language learning when communicating in more than one language due to their impairment of communication. Learners with autism may take the literal meaning of words and sentences. The use of idioms or colloquialisms in the classroom may become very difficult to learn for ESOL learners with autism. For example, idioms that may be used in an ESOL classroom are 'it's raining cats and dogs' and colloquialisms such as 'gonna get a bite' or 'see ya later'. Gilchrist et al. (2001) suggest that studies of autism in adults have revealed a reduction in symptoms. Adults develop language and communication skills but may be impaired due to autism. The ability of ESOL teachers to diagnose autism in adult ESOL learners is difficult due to teachers being unable to identify whether the language is a barrier or the learners have autism. For example, when an ESOL teacher elicits answers and uses peer correction ESOL learners with autism may have a good memory to repeat answers. Learners with autism may have the skills to impersonate others and could use language revised to communicate in group activities. Learners with autism have good memory and could use the skills to remember language such as the past perfect or perfect continuous. ESOL learners with autism may have little confidence when interacting with other learners due to their impaired communication skills. ESOL learning usually follows a rules structure to help learners to remember the order of words. The structure is 'to be +participle', learners with autism may be able to remember the rules structure and may find ESOL learning not as challenging as non-autism learners. Tek et al. (2013) suggest that learners with autism tend to learn

rules and follow structure well. Good memory will enable learners to learn the rules and use the correct format to form a sentence structure.

ESOL learners with autism may find accent and echolalia a barrier to learning.

Goldfus (2012) identifies phonemes as an important aspect of sentence structure as pronunciation could change the meaning of the words, which could become a barrier for learning for learners with autism.

Social interaction may be a challenging task for learners with autism. Watkins et al. (2014) propose that learners with autism may find it difficult to integrate into the school and community due to social shortfalls. The shortfalls could lead to withdrawal and isolation in the classroom which could influence the learners' success at school, social and emotional development and quality of life. On the other hand, low level ESOL courses require learners to practice learnt language to develop oral fluency. Learners with autism have a good memory and could repeat learnt language in role play activities. Some ESOL learners are motivated to learn ESOL and achieve their aims from the course and therefore may have no interest in social interactions. Stevenson et al. (2015) suggest that learners with autism may have different motivation needs and what interests one learner may not interest another. A teacher has an important responsibility to find naturalistic ways to engage learners with autism in interaction and the educational environment. ESOL learners also lack social interaction skills due to the confidence in using limited English to interact, which makes identifying the traits of autism more difficult. Learners may have no other first language learners in the class and may not communicate with others due to a lack of confidence in speaking English. ESOL teachers may find it difficult to assess whether such learners have traits of autism or the confidence in socialising.

ESOL teachers may have difficulty assessing whether learners have autism when learners attend for two lessons a week on a six week course.

The challenges of Autism in the classroom

Learners with autism may have a range of academic abilities. For example, ESOL learners with autism may have no difficulty in understanding tenses, sentence structure and meaning of words as they generally have a good memory but may find reading with expression and intonation difficult. Roycroft (2015) declares that learners with autism find it difficult to interpret text, understand text and relate text with their life experiences. For example, learners with autism may have never been exposed to the English language and therefore learning ESOL may become more difficult. Some learners with autism may have tremendous difficulty learning basic skills, including reading, writing and maths. Other learners may be gifted in particular area, such as decoding words, but may lack the ability to comprehend meaning in reading. Benwell (2017) highlights that learners with autism may have an educational program that is developed by the teachers and or parents. Some learners may require teaching aids at all times, whilst others may require extra help during certain periods of the class. Difficulties usually arise with the learners when there is a lack of communication between the parents, educators and the teachers. Teachers may not be supported or equipped with the tools, resources and proper training to teach learners with autism. For example, how to identify autism in low level ESOL learners. Parents are usually aware and become experts in the individual needs of the learners and can provide excellent support for the teachers. Roycroft (2015) suggests that most learners who have autism find writing challenging, struggle with

auditory processing and find lecture driven teaching terrible. For example, an ESOL teacher may demonstrate a role-play and ask learners to write about what they have witnessed. Benwell (2017) advises that many students with autism may require a specific style of teaching and a supportive learning environment.

Strategies used to enable learning

Teachers use strategies to help learners with autism overcome learning barriers in the classroom by structuring the environment. For example, having a timetable of activities and learning outcomes. Learners with autism may have common environmental areas of difficulties such as noisy areas, smelly areas, crowded areas, situations that lack structure, situations that depend on social interpretation. The teacher needs to ensure the classroom is set up in a way that it supports teaching and learning so learners with autism do not feel isolated in an ESOL classroom. The environment of the classroom can improve learning for learners with autism and may prevent behavioural problems before they occur. When structuring the classroom the teacher may consider how the students are seated, where the students are in relation to one another, how learners move across the classroom and minimise distraction to keep the students engaged. Grandin (2002) suggests the majority of learners with autism are visual thinkers and pictures are more appropriate to use in teaching learners with autism. Low level ESOL learners are taught using visuals to help them understand meaning of the words. Teachers should avoid long verbal instructions and use ICT in the classroom as learners with autism tend to be talented at using computers. For example, learners with autism could translate words and meaning from their native language into English using translation applications

available online. Learners may have problems in motor control in their hands and have difficulties in handwriting. Teachers should allow students to use computers as typing is found to be much easier. To use ICT facilities in the classroom will enable learners with autism to work at their own pace and enable the teacher to meet differentiation needs. Learners with autism may be distracted with visuals and fluorescent lights. To avoid the problem teachers should place the learners' desks or try avoiding using fluorescent lights. Some learners with autism respond better when teachers make eye contact with them. Learners with autism may find it easier to associate words with pictures and teachers could use flashcards to encourage learning.

Conclusion

Research has highlighted the awareness of autism. The causes of autism are still being explored. Individuals with autism may have difficulties with language and communication and social interaction but teaching strategies will enable learners to excel in their learning and reach their maximum potential. Teaching students with autism may be challenging but it may also be rewarding. Teaching methods can be used effectively to help learners with autism to overcome learning barriers. There may be no cure for autism but developing and implementing new treatments are being identified regularly. Learners with autism are often able to learn to live relatively happy and productive lives. They are able to interact with the society on their own terms. Identifying autism will enable teachers and institutions to provide the relevant support. ESOL departments' use pictures and words to encourage and promote learning. ESOL learners with autism have extra difficulties as they are not

only learning a new language but must ensure they process the information accordingly. Learners could be on different levels of the autism spectrum, where learners will have different abilities and barriers. Educators have a responsibility to provide the correct teaching strategy to help learners with autism excel and overcome learning barriers.

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