

## Autistic students in ESL Classroom

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### What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder that has two main characteristics: the first one is persistent difficulties in starting, understanding, and maintaining social relationships and interactions. The second one is repetitive patterns of behaviours and interests (Baron Cohen 2008; Black et al 2014). Even though both of these must be present from childhood, they are often not as evident since many autistic people learn to mask their differences (Black et al 2014).

Autism can also come with other problems or characteristics such as trouble sleeping or restricted eating. Many autistic people have Sensory Processing Disorder, which is characterised by hypersensitivity to visual, tactile, or auditory stimuli. Issues with higher executive brain functions are also common, i.e., problems with starting tasks on time, organising work, completing the task that are already started, procrastination, getting easily distracted, bad working memory, and so on.

### Language and autism

A common stereotype is that autistic people have problems with learning languages, e.g., autistic kids start speaking their first language later than other kids. This is not entirely true. The spectrum is wide, and, while some autistic children start speaking later, others have exceptional linguistic talent and learn to speak, read, and write ahead of their peers (Baron Cohen 2008). Likewise, many might have exceptional talent for second language acquisition.

In addition, some aspects of autism might impact specific language skills. For example, many autistic people struggle with small talk, understanding metaphors, or sarcasm.

### What words and symbols to use

Autism is listed in the Diagnostic Manuals as 'Autism Spectrum Disorder'. However, many autistic advocates do not like the word 'disorder'. Because studies show that autism is a natural and evolutionary-beneficial neurological diversity (Silberman 2017; Baron Cohen 2020), they prefer 'Autism Spectrum Condition'. Also, because it is an integral part of who they are, the majority of autistic people prefer identity-first language, so 'autistic person' instead of 'a person with autism'.

The autistic community is by and large against the use of blue and the puzzle symbol for representation. This is because, according to them, both are associated with some questionable institutions that claim to, but do not really support autistic people. When celebrating autism or raising awareness, opt for the rainbow infinity symbol instead.

### Autistic students in your classroom

You might think that, if you ever had an autistic student in your classroom, you would know about it, but this is not necessarily true. Many people, especially women, remain undiagnosed well into their adulthood (Rynkiewicz et al 2019). Furthermore, many people might have some, but not all of the autistic traits, and while they would not get an official autism diagnosis, they might experience similar problems as those who have all of the traits.

### How to make your classroom more inclusive for autistic students

There are many easy changes you can make to your classroom and lessons in order to help autistic students thrive:

- Make sure you provide a variety of interactions, such as group and individual work.
- Do not value collaboration over working on your own. Both are essential skills.

- You can establish work stations in your classroom, i.e., an area for working together and a separate area to work quietly by yourself.
- Offer students options on who to work with so they feel more comfortable.
- Before you label a behaviour as lazy or disorganised, offer the student help in structuring their work and reminding themselves of their tasks.
- Sensory Processing Disorder might make it difficult to filter dialogues from background noise. If you bring audio to the class, accompany it with a script, if possible. Also, during discussion times, make sure they can see the speaker's face to aid their understanding with lip reading.
- If you notice a student is uncomfortable with change, allow them to stay in the same seat or work with the same classmate.
- Not all students feel comfortable with public speaking or presenting in front of the entire class. Offer alternatives such as digital essays, presentations, or videos they can record at home and play to the class.
- Look for materials that represent autistic people. Remember that these should not necessarily focus on autism, but show autistic people going about their lives and doing everyday activities.
- Avoid sensory overstimulation – use cool and calm colours and pay attention to any external noise, smell, or bright lighting that can be too distracting and overload the students.
- Spend extra time explaining any metaphors, idioms, or any phrasing in English that can be confusing or open to misinterpretation.
- Don't teach only the language, teach social skills and norms, especially if these differ from the students' country of origin. This might include what topics of discussion and personal questions are acceptable in formal and semi-formal settings, active listening skills, interrupting speakers and so on.
- Follow set patterns, routines and lesson structures – sudden change might be upsetting to autistic students. If you want to do something new to add variety, explain at the beginning of the class that there will be a new routine or element, and describe what it is.

## Conclusion

Remember that autism spectrum is a huge range and each individual is different. You can always conduct student surveys to learn about your students' preferences for interaction patterns or classroom activities. Making these surveys anonymous will give your students the confidence to share their needs. All in all, striving for more inclusion and diversity will help all of your students, not just those who are autistic.

## Further Reading

Baron-Cohen, S. (2008) *Autism and Asperger's Syndrome. The Facts*. OUP, Kindle Edition

Baron-Cohen, S. (2020) *The Pattern Seekers: How Autism Drives Human Invention*. Basic Books

Black, Donald W., and Jon E. Grant. (2014) *DSM-5® Guidebook : The Essential Companion to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, American Psychiatric Publishing. ProQuest Ebook Central

Rynkiewicz, A. Janas-Kozik, M. Słopień, A. (2019) *Girls and women with autism*. *Psychiatria Polska*

Silberman, S. (2017) *NeuroTribes. The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Different*. Atlantic books