Teaching English to Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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A B S T R A C T

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) typically show a unique pattern in their language learning. This fact has been documented in a number of earlier investigations. However, it was discovered that Indonesian teachers and educational institutions were insufficiently prepared to fulfill the needs of their students, both in terms of teaching strategies and the material development. This study then aimed at examining appropriate strategies of teaching English to ASD students as well as finding out the challenges faced by teacher in teaching English in the classroom. The research design of this study was case study research with qualitative approach. The participant of this study was English teacher at SLBN 01 Lombok Timur chosen using purposive sampling. The researchers used documentation, in-depth interviews, and observation to acquire data. The results revealed that the teacher faced some challenges in teaching ASD students, such as lack of focus and concentration during teaching and learning process and speech delay. To address these issues, the teacher and school principle used some strategies to teach children with autism, namely developing oral language comprehension and developing lesson plan with visual media to help the student learn English as a foreign language

Introduction

It is undeniable that education is very crucial in every person's life. As a result, equality and equity in education need to be enhanced and encouraged to confirm the necessity of giving care and attention to everyone, including students with special needs. (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). One of the types of students with special needs is students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Every year, the number of people with autism increases in Indonesia. However, there is no accurate national estimate of the number of children in Indonesia who are affected by autism. Sakya, Santosa, & Bagus (2017) in (Budiyanto et al., 2020). Yet, it is clear that Indonesia has a significant number of children with autism. At least there is an increase of around 500 children each year. The most recent estimate puts the number of autistic children in Indonesia at 2.4 million and rise significantly year after year. KPPPA RI (2018) in (Herna, 2022).

In the classroom, EFL teachers frequently have trouble instructing students with ASD where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), since they have more difficulty understanding and producing language code. Therefore, autistic students need special assistance or treatment when learning English.

Furthermore, researches on teaching students with autism in schools have been conducted many times in various fields of study. Some of them were conducted by (Maulidiyah & Thamrin, Nani Ronsani, 2023; Padmadewi & Artini, 2017; Romadlon, 2017; Sari et al., 2021; Susanti, 2024), etc. (Sari et al., 2021) found that the use of the

TPR method is really helpful for the students with autism as they are able to improve their English vocabulary, and it is easy for the teachers to control the class with various activities. Teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is also expanded to a wider method of teaching. The implementation of Individual Education Plan (IEP) in teaching English to ASD students is increasing their ability to comprehend foreign language (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). IEP help the students to utilize and maximize the use of visual media to support their learning in English. Moreover, to encourage the ASD students to practice their English, speech therapy is a good solution to stimulate clear words and solid sentences. (Romadlon & Gudnanto, 2017)

Furthermore, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to test the students' grammar and vocabulary ability is also showing good results. According to Beata Jelinkova (2020), ICT is able to prove that the most effective English exercise for students with autism is questions with matching.

Next study that is focused on the development of teaching and learning process for ASD students was conducted by (Andrea & Carvajal, 2021). The study supports that in order to achieve the highest goals in teaching special needs pupils in school, it is important to implement suitable strategies with methodological adaptation in the form of reasonable adjustments strategies, time and behavioral management, and working routines inside the school rules. This will help the principal, teachers, and students to have a good process together.

In order to stimulate and encourage ASD students to learn foreign language, in this case English, the implementation of TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children) technique can be implemented in school because of its effectivity (Susanti, 2024). The TEACCH technique combines activity both for home and school environments. The technique has broader elements as it is included various strategies such as utilization of activity schedules, the focusing on physical learning environment, the use of visual aids, and the importance of social interactions to train the ASD students' social skill for they are able to follow the learning process.

Moreover, the technique and strategy in classroom rely heavily on how the teachers design their learning process for students with ASD. According to (Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020), the teachers created different class-assignments, different content materials with less difficult task, and outside classroom learning activities to assess the students' bravery and concern.

Based on some descriptions above, this study aims at investigating teaching English practice to Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in a special school in Indonesia focusing on finding the data related to the following research questions:

1. What are the teaching strategies that can be implemented in the acquisition of English by students with ASD?
2. What difficulties do teachers encounter when teaching students with ASD?

Research Method

1. Research Design

This study belongs to qualitative research. According to Gall., Gall., & Borg (2003, p.435-436) case study research is one of several approaches to qualitative inquiry. It has four characteristics: (1) the study of phenomena by focusing on spesific instances, that is, case; (2) an in-depth study of each case; (3) the study of the phenomenon in its natural context; and (4) the study of the emic perspective of case study participants.

These characteristics suggest the following definition of case study research: it is the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon.

2. Setting of the Study

This study was conducted at SLBN 1 Lombok Timur from April to November 2023.

3. Participant of Study

Participant of this study was the English teacher in SLBN 1 Lombok Timur selected using purposive sampling which is also known as judgment sampling. It is the process of selecting an informant on purpose based on the characteristics they possess. As suggested by Bernard (2002), Lewis & Shep- pard (2006) in (Tongco, 2007) that the researcher analyzes what information is necessary.Then, the researcher searches for people who are ready to provide the information based on their expertise or experience

4. Data Collection

   a. Technique of Collecting Data

In collecting data, the researcher conducted some techniques; Observation, Interview, and documentation. Here, the researcher provided some questions to be answered by the respondent related to the English teaching process to students with SDA. In addition, to get information more deeply the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview (a series of open ended questions based on the topics that the researcher wants to cover) with the participants. As suggested by (Ruslin et al., 2022) that compared to structured (or even unstructured) interviews, semi-structured interviews are more effective because they enable the researchers, particularly in qualitative research, to obtain detailed information from informants. Additionally, It is also adaptive and flexible.

   b. Data Analysis

For data analysis, the result of observation and interview was analyzed descriptively. In this case, the procedure of data analysis applied followed the procedures proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994, p.10) in (Savenye, 2001) consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Result and Discussion

Cunha (2009) in (Cordeiro et al., 2022) mentioned the term "autism" derives from the Greek word autos, which means "in oneself," because it accurately captures the most distinguishing quality of those who are autistic, namely introspection. Alike, Sunu (2012, p. 7) in (Sari et al., 2021) explained that'Autism' comes from the word 'auto,' which means 'alone'. This term is used because people with autistic symptoms frequently look like people who live alone.

The symptoms of autism should be recognized by parents and doctors since they appear before the child turns three years old. Those involve social interaction, communication, and play skills that are different from those of other children. (Romadlon, 2017). Additionally, Students with autism have trouble focusing, memorizing words, understanding complicated sentences, developing communication, engaging with others, and often avoid making eye contact with interlocutors (Sari, 2015) in (Sari et al., 2021). Thus, It is believed that students with autism spectrum

disorder (ASD) are one of the most difficult groups for teachers to work with (White, Smith, Smith, & Stodden, 2012) in (Findley et al., n.d.)

In addition, some characteristics of persons with ASD have been mentioned by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020). These characteristics include not looking at objects when someone points them out, not looking at objects when someone points them out, having trouble connecting with others or not caring about them at all, avoiding eye contact and wanting to be alone, having difficulty understanding other people's feelings or expressing their own feelings, and many more. (Roitsch et al., 2021). Furthermore, Sunartini (2000) in (Nugraheni, 2012) mentioned some clinical symptoms that are often found in autistic children:

1. Physical Disorders
   a. Failure of lateralization due to abnormality in brain maturation (brain function) in which one cerebral hemisphere of the brain is dominant over the other in certain cerebral functions. In this case, autism people are known to have left-brain exclusive.
   b. The presence of abnormal dermatoglyphics (abnormal fingerprints)
   c. The higher possibility of upper respiratory tract infections, ear infections, excessive belching (like the effect of GERD), febrile seizures, and constipation.
2. Behavioral Disorders
   a. Disturbances in social interaction: children are rather unable to relate normally to both parents and other people. The childrendo not react when called, and do not like or refuses to be hugged or loved. They prefer to be alone and are not responsive to smiles or touches in general.
   b. Communication and language disorders: communication and language skills of children with autism are very slow or even non-existent. They tend to mutter meaningless words, likes parroting and repeating them. They do not show or use body movements and rather pull their parent's hand to use to take the object they want.
   c. Motor behavior disorders: this disorder causes the children to have difficulty while moving their body parts, such as hands, legs, and the process of showing gestures. This leads them to have difficulty in changing routines and controlling their emotions while having a tantrum.
   d. Emotional, feeling and affective disorders: Sudden fear of objects that are not scary. Often there are sudden changes in feelings, such as laughing for no reason or suddenly crying.
   e. Sensory perception disorders: this causes them to have problems in controlling sensation coming from the body, such as liking to kiss or lick objects, not feeling pain when injured or bumped, and so o

As a result, the Inclusive Classrooms' project now has autism as one of its main areas of attention. The need to understand Indonesian teachers' perceptions of autism, various teaching strategies related with autism, and their opinions regarding the optimal educational settings for autistic children served as the foundation for this investigation. (Budiyanto et al., 2020). Steffie et al. (2020) in (Andrea & Carvajal, 2021) added when teaching students with ASD, it is important to remember that they have special educational needs.

According to Mayton et al. (2010) and Accardo (2015) in Brahim (2022), teachers must explicitly establish specific plans to help students with ASD achieve their academic goals because of their specialness and individuality. Thus, in order to understand the different types of strategies employed by English teacher for special

education needs, the research examined the documentation of English teachers, conducted observation and in-depth interviews with them.

Based on the result of observation, differentiated instruction is one of the most effective teaching techniques for students with autism. It is the instruction that is given to students in response to their various learning demands in the classroom. In addition, to meet the needs of students with ASD, mostly audiovisual aids are used to provide various educational materials. Then, to make sure that students understood the topic and could effectively connect with their teachers, teachers frequently employed visual aids as it has been confirmed that ASD kids learn best visually (Gladfelter et al., 2019). As a result, using visual aids increases ASD students' motivation to study while also making it easier to teach this type of special student.

Furthermore, the challenges of teaching English to ASD students can be traced back tohow they often demonstrate unusual and distinctive behaviours. (Ghedeir Brahim, 2022)These behaviours led to several needs that must be achieved while teaching, such as the special classes for ASD students under the supervision of psychologist, their difficulty in establishing relationships with their classmate and teachers, the students' difficulties in arranging communication while demonstrating the learning subject, and the teachers' limitation in handling ASD students due to lack of training in this field.

In order to solve these problems, various types of methods, media, and approaches wereapplied by teacher and school principal. The use of video, audio, and written formats while giving materials to students were required. These media helped them to understand instructions and keep up with their teachers' explanation. The importance of visual media in teaching students with ASD was based on study that found that ASD students generally will be more focused with teaching tools in the form of visual aids (Maghfirah Ramadhani, Syamsul Bahri, 2019). The reason of using visual aids during learning process was because the students could not focus and concentrate for longer time without any media that could help them to stay still at their chair. With the readiness of helpful and importance tools, in this case visual aids, teacher would be able to control the class and guide the students to show their expression and willingness to participate during class.

There were several difficulties and challenges that the teacher had faced during English class, one of them is communication strategies. The class, from seventh to eight grades, consisted of 4 students which has Autist Spectrum Disorder with different level of behaviors and symptoms. Due to these slight differences, the teacher had to try harder to communicate to each of them. In order to get their attention, the teacher repeated instructions several times and talk to each one of them alternately. In term of learning English, words and sentences had to be mentioned clearly so they can follow the flow of the lesson, due to the fact that one of them is also having a speech delay. Therefore, it was quite complicated to force one topic to be completed in one meeting. Aside from communication strategy, the teacher background was also becoming one of the challenges in teaching English to the ASD students in the school. Teaching English to pupils with special need, especially ASD, need specific English qualification and preparation so the learning objectives can be achieved. With this specific qualification, a teacher can expand more topics and apply various methods in order to stimulate students' ability in learning English.

To maximize the interactions and communication during learning process, the teacher used several media to get the students' attention. Because most of them have different needs and behaviors, various types of media had been implemented such as

colorful books, bottles, maps, puzzles, and ball/bowling. These sources were used frequently by the teacher according to the topic that had been chosen. The use of these stuffs can help the teacher to control the class, but sometimes can create rejection from some of the students due to differences in interests. To be able to utilize teaching media maximally, the teacher would attract the students' focus with various tasks, games, and questions related to English.

Another challenge while teaching English to ASD students was the speech delay. Speech delay is the condition where a person has a slow speaking ability despite not in the toddler stage anymore. Several ASD students in the school had this speech delay because of internal and external factor and was affecting their activity in school. A study concluded that few factors of speech delay in ASD child is premature birth and foreign language exposure through social media (Mufidah, 2024)

Based on the explanation of the teacher in school, speech delay was caused by lack of interaction between the students and their parents in their home. This lack of family interaction influenced the ASD students' linguist ability whenever they meet with other people. Moreover, instead of get used to verbal communication, today's parents tend to give gadget their children which would worsen the speech delay.

Conclusion

It is clear from the previous explanation that the decision to employ visual media as the main form of instruction has taken into consideration as the students with ASD are visual learners. The use of visual materials in customized education has been found to have a substantial impact on the ASD student's success and motivation in learning the English language.

Suggestion

Considering the conclusion above, the present researcher would like to propose some suggestions:

1. For learners; The results of this study can be used as a benchmark to improve the quality of their teaching and learning by making the results of this research a lesson for the future
2. For lecturers; the researcher hopes that the result of this study can be useful for the lecturers.
3. For the other researchers; it is suggested for the next other researchers to analyze more deeply about teaching English to ASD students. The further researchers are going to be interested in using actual and more corpus to cover the limitation of research

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