

Helping Students with Learning Disabilities (ASD)

Ian Jedlica

Abstract: Integration in education has brought students with learning disabilities into the forefront of everyday teaching in Hungary. Among many types of disadvantaged students, for example, those with ADHD, ODD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, social, economic and linguistic disadvantages, there are also those who suffer from ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). This paper uses research from many papers, including those from Peter Moran of the British Council and Jennifer Reppond, to discover basic principles in how to deal with and teach this type of student in the foreign language classroom. It then moves on to show how these principles helped to create awareness of the problems involved and give some workable practices within the classroom to make an acceptable learning environment for one particular student with ASD.

Keywords: ASD, education, teaching, autism, routine, interest, motivation

After working for over a decade in primary schools in Budapest, I was fortunate enough to gain a position as an English teacher in my local High School. Instead of being spread across the grades, giving a few lessons per week to each grade as I had done in Budapest, I was given a more focussed task of teaching in the ‘intensive language’ year, a special year in this particular institution between the 8th and 9th grades in which students are given a timetable almost exclusively concentrating on languages, while maintaining their knowledge of the major subjects such as Maths, History and Hungarian Literature. The level of English competence within the students was higher than I had experienced in Budapest, and in the most advanced class there were a few talented individuals. One certain student, however, was not – in fact, he was hardly ever present in my lessons. I was informed by the form teacher a few weeks after starting the school that this student was suspected of having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and after a few weeks, the parents of the student were forced by the form teacher to send him to another school. In this paper, I would like to examine how a teacher could help to integrate and keep the interest of students with ASD in the English classroom, and more specifically how I could have helped to integrate and develop this particular student if he had in fact stayed in the school.

From across the educational sphere, there are many sources of information on helping students with learning disabilities. One particular paper by Peter Moran from the British Council states there are six steps teachers can do to help students with ASD, of which five are of use in Hungary. The teacher should

1. educate themselves on the subject of ASD;
 2. communicate with the parents of the student and keep in regular contact;
 3. prepare the classroom through clear and consistent routines;
 4. try to educate the student's classmates and peers on the subject of ASD;
 5. try to manage any ASD behavioural challenges, such as none or little eye contact, monotonous speech, a lack of social contact or any panic responses to surprises.
- (Moran "British Council")

The first point is shown in research to be important as there is a significant lack of necessary training and material for teachers in this area of education (Reppond 69). In order to help students with learning disabilities, such as ASD, teachers must gather as much information as possible about how to help students with learning disabilities and in so doing develop themselves professionally (Reppond 77). Once the teacher has sufficient knowledge and training to move forward, then the fourth point can be developed, educating the classmates and peers on the subject of students with learning difficulties and what can be implemented to help them.

The second point is to create communication between both teacher and parents. Research shows that, unfortunately, there is often a lack of communication between the teacher and the parents of a student with learning disabilities (Reppond 68). A rapport must be built up between these two parties to maximise the learning opportunities of the student. Routine is said to be of utmost importance for students with ASD, and routine starts at home in pre-school years. This routine should continue or be mirrored in their education at school (Reppond 68), by using the same instructions and techniques, and this can only happen if there is communication between the teacher and the parents. Conversely, if the teacher initiates a routine in the classroom, the parents should also follow it at home. On a side note, in terms of English learning, if the parents cannot speak English, then there is less chance they can help their child in learning at home (Reppond 74), though this problem is also common with all the students whose parents do not speak the language being learnt.

In terms of the third point on preparing the classroom, other research mentions the use of four main strategies on how to help students with learning difficulties in the actual lesson: co-teaching, differentiated instruction, peer-mediated instruction, and peer-mediated interventions (Ford). The best way to solve problems in the classroom is to employ a co-teacher, that is an extra educator who has the time to deal with the extra materials and individualised problems of the student (Reppond 76). , This is, however, not a financial possibility in the Hungarian state system. Peer-mediated instruction and interventions would also be difficult to implement and sustain among the students, even if they were educated on the subject of learning disabilities as mentioned in the fifth point, as they have themselves, without learning disabilities, have their own time and learning constraints. Of the four main strategies, differentiated instruction seems to be the most feasible, especially for those with ASD and developmental disabilities (DD) (Flores 46), by developing teaching materials which allows all students to learn effectively, no matter what their level of individual abilities may

be. Unfortunately, it is also known that teachers have a lack of time to plan and create the best lesson/material for these students (Reppond 72).

The fifth point, managing ASD behavioural challenges, can be helped by the other four, but especially by how the teacher manages the lessons and the tasks. For example, students with autism function better when given visual material to work with (Padmadewi 164), and so some of the behavioural problems would lessen as a result. There is also no need to rush from one exercise to the next exercise, seemingly to cover more ground, as working through simple tasks slowly and creating conceptual understanding of the subject or target language among students is more beneficial in terms of development (Minkel).

According to a study by the Florida Education Association (FEA), there are certain classroom management techniques which maximise learning time to help all students, including giving clear, concise tasks based on each student's individual knowledge and skill, lessons with logical, structured instruction, and using substantive modelling and guiding and probing students, giving corrective feedback as they move through the tasks (Reppond 86).

Therefore, with the use of a three-step strategy, it is possible to develop teaching materials which grabs the attention of the student with learning disabilities, stopping them from regressing from their environment and the students around them.

Firstly, while keeping in mind the visual aspect of the materials, all presentations given in class should show more models and examples, including pictures, colours, and even colour coding to grab attention (Jara 86). The visuals and examples should correspond with whatever the obsessive interest of the student with learning disabilities is, in this particular student's case it would have been visuals from Marvel comics or films. This will not disturb the other students in class as they must also learn, and any help in terms of learning or attention, especially visuals, is welcome.

Secondly, all instructions used within the lesson must be simple and short, but above all, predictable, by the use of a set of routine language of instruction, and repeated, to give more time for the student to understand where the lesson is going (Jara 86). The instructions should be more like a drill or habit, with no surprises or additions which break the particular student's attention (Padwadewi 167). The more the set drill or routine is used, the stronger the concepts are formed in the mind (Padwadewi 168) and there would be less likelihood of the student drifting away from the lesson.

Lastly, the lessons should be logically ordered and set out at the beginning, with given timed tasks shown in a picture story sequence of events, all divided into smaller segments (Jara 86) where one instruction follows another until the final goal of the lesson is achieved. In this way, the student knows where the lesson is going and what to expect in the lesson without any surprises which could upset their assumptions on what they will experience and so switch off their attention.

The Marvel Man

With a staff of more than fifty teachers and a student population of more than 500 pupils from grades 5 to 12, with an optional extra 'intensive language' year for those entering the school from other institutions after the grade 8, the high school I teach in is among some of the best in the country, and one of the best in Pest county. For a student to study in the school, they must take an entrance exam either to enter the 5th grade or the so-called 'language year' after grade 8. Only the top 35 enter in the 5th grade, whereas in the 'language year', including English, German, French and Italian, three classes begin, allowing the top 100 students to enter. After completing the 'language year', these students then begin their grade 9 and continue to their graduation in grade 12.

The particular English group which was once attended by the student with learning difficulties began learning in the school last year in the 'language year', a group, with the student mentioned, consisting of 18 students aged 15 or 16, with 8 girls and 10 boys. The group has been and still are more or less a well-motivated, balanced, intelligent unit and on the whole are well-disciplined and work well together, better than their peers from other groups of the same year. They all come from a healthy and rich family background, all living in detached houses, most students (except three) live with both their parents, and one student from the eighteen is an only child.

The particular student with learning disabilities also comes from a healthy family background and has a younger sibling. On the occasions he was in class, I realised he showed some typical symptoms of ASD: it was hard to get him to respond to his name, sometimes only a touch would bring him to attention, he excluded himself from any group, even going to the toilet until the bell rang for the end of class, probably looking for a comforting place to escape to; he mainly avoided eye contact, and once his attention was caught, he was also quite slow to reply to any question and repeated his words while holding the same facial expression throughout. By far the most important aspect of his ASD in terms of teaching was his overly obsessive interest in Marvel, be it comics or films. As soon as a reference was made, the student was attentive and proceeded to talk about that certain area of the fictional universe. Once he began, it was difficult to get him to stop, but as soon as he could be stopped, he disconnected himself yet again from any communication with the teacher or the students.

Conclusion

After researching ASD and the ways in which a teacher could help the educational development of a student with learning disabilities, if implemented, the points, strategies and classroom techniques mentioned above would not only have given the student an opportunity to learn, but would also have given him the chance to become a part of his class, and in so doing, become more open to society as a whole. By giving more logical, visual, routine-run and simply instructed lessons to the class, the environment would change to one of order and calm, interspaced with colour, sound and models devoted to that particular student's obsessive interest, and although this would not suit all those attending, after noticing and learning more of the condition of ASD, those other students may begin to appreciate their part in helping a fellow classmate.

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