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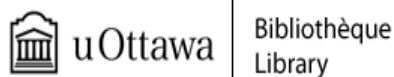


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**CHILDREN WITH ASD LEARNING ESL: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES**

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**Abstract**

The article deals with the methodology of teaching ESL to children with the autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the creation of necessary environment, taking into account the peculiarities of ASD. It outlines the basic features of ASD, regarding it as a complex disorder and provides recommendations to parents and teachers in terms of ESL teaching and learning. The article also touches upon the issues of problematic behaviour and tantrums in the classroom, providing possible solutions of those problems. Among other methods Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is used. ABA therapy has proved to be efficient in teaching children with ASD and to avoid undesirable behaviour. The article specifically focuses on ESL learning computer applications and websites, which develop such skills as attention, quick reaction, and broaden the horizon. Many of them, having been developed by parents themselves, take into account specific interests and needs of an ASD child, for example, plain background, absence of background music, clear introduction of instructions, etc.

**Keywords**

ASD – English language – Teaching – Development – Computer technologies

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## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (further referred to as ASD) is considered to be the most mysterious phenomenon of the 21st century with approximately one out of 67 people diagnosed with it all around the world. The number of people with ASD has grown according to the statistics by 78% for the last 5 years. Most scholars<sup>1</sup> agree that it should primarily be characterized as a spectrum disorder. Although much still remain debatable and undiscovered about ASD, many scholars<sup>2</sup> generally agree on the following ASD markers and traits:

1. ASD is a spectrum disorder;
2. It is a general developmental disorder;
3. It is an innate complex disorder of the brain neural development, caused by genetic mutations;
4. ASD is not determined by nationality, location or upbringing;
5. It emerges in early childhood (1-3 years);
6. Some autistic features stay for life.

As the core problem that individuals with ASD generally experience is communication with the outside world, general features of ASD can be further subdivided into clinical features and pragmatic ones.

Some clinical features of ASD:

1. Social disadaptation;
2. Lack of shared interest ("the red flag" of autism);
3. Repetitive movements;
4. Turn-taking disorder;
5. Lack of visual contact;
6. Inability to establish contacts with peers;
7. Inability to address with request;
8. Specific speech disorder.

Not all these features necessarily mean ASD. At a very early age children may lack certain communicative skills. Still, the combination of all or most of these markers commonly alerts the parents, and still many of them turn to specialists, when the child is 4 or 5, although early intervention (1-3) is crucial in case of ASD and can help ASD children develop quicker and better. The reason of such delay is that some children demonstrate bright knowledge of certain specific fields (foreign flags, dinosaurs), which has no practical application (but makes parents consider their child bright), or parents misleadingly define their child as just calm. Sometimes a child may develop normally but suddenly shows regress.

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<sup>1</sup> F. R. Volkmar y L. A. Weisner, *Autism: A Practical Guide for Parents, Families, and Teachers*: in 3 book. Prince 3. Fred R. Volkmar, Lisa A. Weisner; Persian. English B. Zueva, A. Chechina (Yekaterinburg: Rama Publishing, 2014) y T. Peters, *Autism: From Theoretical Understanding to Pedagogical Impact: A Book for Defectologists*. Per. from English M. M. Shcherbakova; edited by L. M. Schipitsina; D. N. Isaev (Moscú: Humanit. VLADOS Center, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> O. Dolenko, A special child. Psychiatrist Olga Dolenko page URL: <http://olgadolenko.blogspot.com/> (accessed: 05/28/2018) y R. Leaf y D. Macken, *Behavioral Strategies. Curriculum for Intensive Behavioral Intervention in Autism*. Translated from English. Under the total. ed. Tolkachevoi L. L. (Moscow: IP Tolkachev, 2016).

At the preschool age pragmatic speech disorder is noticed while speech develops:

1. Inability to use the speech adequately;
2. As a rule, quick tempo of speech;
3. Constant interruption;
4. Inability to observe the reaction of the partner;
5. Dominance of the child's topic in the conversation;
6. Inability to understand the implications due to the lack of abstract mind;
7. Distorted selection of topics for the conversation.

Thus, general features of ASD are both clinical and pragmatic and special knowledge is required in the process of education alongside with special approach.

Besides, a child with ASD has to learn to be part of the society, as G. F. Kayumova et al say, young people should voluntarily accept moral obligations and universal moral norms”<sup>3</sup>.

## Methods

The study was aimed to prepare the theoretical background for organizing classes of English for children with ASD. We used a method of complex analysis to describe clinical features of ASD, psychological aspects of ASD and pragmatic speech disorder typical for children with ASD. Based on the data obtained we got a cross-sectional portrait of a child with ASD including, but not limited to, social disadaptation, lack of shared interest, inability to establish contacts with peers, inability to address with request, ritual behaviour, etc. According to the cross-sectional portrait of a child with ASD we worked out general recommendations for teachers of English working with children with ASD, which include the adaptation of the environment, creation of in-class rituals, working in small groups or choosing the form of tutorial classes, etc.

At the next stage we searched the Internet resources in ESL to choose the ones adapted and/or suitable for being used by children with ASD for learning.

## Results and discusion

The strategies of a teacher’s behaviour when dealing with children with ASD should in general be the same as those used when dealing with gifted students: it is vital to take into account social, ethnic, cultural and personal characteristics of the learners we deal with<sup>4</sup>. However, those characteristics are quite different in case of children with ASD – they process information in their brain differently<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Kayumova G. et all., “Moral education of high school students in national (TurkiC) schools through literatura”, International Journal of Mechanical Engineering and Technology (IJMET) VoL: 9 num 10 (2018): 1467–1475.

<sup>4</sup> N. P. Pomortseva y T. I. Kolabinova, Identifying giftedness within traditionally underrepresented groups of students in the USA / N. P. Pomortseva. ED-2015 Proceedings of 9th International Technology, Education and Development Conference. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> J. S. Reppond, English Language Learners on the Autism Spectrum: Identifying Gaps in Learning. School of Education Student Capstone Theses and Dissertations. 2015. URL: [https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse\\_all/242](https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_all/242) (accessed: 28.05.2018).

## What to avoid

Most children with ASD find it hard to concentrate on a certain topic, so it is desirable to place only the items that are absolutely necessary to fulfil a certain task to avoid distraction and overstimulation. The use of the visual schedule and the timer can help the child to follow the sequence of tasks and to have a clear idea of the timing. Children with ASD follow the routine carefully and spontaneous changes can easily cause stress expressed ex. in tantrums. That dependence on the rigid order or sequence helps them to gain control over the situation and to feel more secure. Moreover, children with ASD due to their concrete thinking style experience difficulties in understanding idioms or sarcasm and perceive the language literally, so brief, simple and specific instructions are preferable. Unacceptable behaviour in the classroom may turn into a serious obstacle if given much attention and not analysed later. ABA specialists support the point of view that it is better to reward desirable acceptable behaviour (ex. by means of tokens) than to punish the child for unacceptable behaviour as the latter may develop into a stereotype, a method of attracting attention. We also need to bear in mind that the attempts of the adults to make the child's manipulations with objects more sensible or break the sequence can also cause stress and tantrums.

## General principles in teaching children with ASD

First of all, it is necessary to adapt the environment, so that the child may feel comfortable and secure. The class may take place on the floor or on fitballs in small groups or one-to-one. This form is preferable as most children with ASD need individual approach.

## Creating the learning environment: choice of learning tools

Most children with ASD are visual types, thus they tend to perceive the visual information better than audial. Therefore it is highly recommended to include photographs of the child, labelled pictures, pictograms, PECS cards, toys and other items suitable for learning and familiar to him/her. If a child has a special interest (develops deep interest in a certain topic), it is strongly recommended to use it to raise motivation for learning. Most ASD children have an ear for music, skills for imitation and excellent memory, so it is also desirable to use songs and poems and computer applications in teaching ESL. Children with ASD generally enjoy using websites and computer applications which are considered to be predictable. That is why the equipment of a language classroom is even more important when teaching children with ASD, than with neurotypical students<sup>6</sup>. We consider that the applications should meet the following requirements:

1. Plain background;
2. No background music;
3. The correct answer is awarded verbally, not with some sound;
4. The instructions are clearly introduced;
5. Tasks vary from simple to more complex ones.

One of the online-resources which can be used in learning ESL is the website Jacob's Lessons<sup>7</sup> (plain background, no background music, the games are adapted for

<sup>6</sup> O. Y. Amurskaya; G. K. Gimaletdinova y L. K. Khalitova, "Multimedia Sanako study 1200 for TEFL in institution of higher education". XLinguae Vol: 10 num 3 (2017): 229-236.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob's Lessons URL: <http://www.jacobslessons.com/> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

the primary use of computer by children with ASD and are methodologically based on ABA principles).

### Teaching colours

It is noted that children with ASD generally easily master the notions of forms and colours apart from more complicated notions and ideas (emotions, relationships between people)<sup>8</sup>. As stated above it is necessary, if possible, to use the child's special interest in teaching colours. A child with ASD may develop attraction for certain colours and rejection of others, which should be taken into account. It is recommended to introduce 2 or 3 colours gradually, using simple clear instructions. A child's knowledge of these colours in real life and his/her ability to match the image in the picture with the real item should be taken into account. There are computer applications designed for children with speech disorder, ASD and Down syndrome, for example "Speak colours" for Ipad<sup>9</sup>. It introduces colours in a combination with the names of items. The Android users can benefit from the application "Show me colours – Autism series"<sup>10</sup> based on the instruction "touch and show" and offers to choose the necessary colour from several options.

### Developing counting skills

Getting started learning to count to 10 in English, it is essential to make sure that the child is familiar with the concept of 'quantity' and can count up to 10 in his/her native language. Although some children with ASD are able to read complex two-digit and three-digit numbers, they experience difficulties mastering operations in the field of counting, as well as the concepts of 'more' and 'less'. Experts note that children with ASD can entertain themselves, mechanically counting up to a thousand and a million, but experience difficulties in solving the simplest mathematical problems. Therefore, teaching them to count both in their native language and in English should be trained in their ratio of the number and number of subjects<sup>11</sup>. Similarly to teaching colours, numbers must be entered sequentially, presenting only one card with a number at the initial stage and only in the subsequent stages the corresponding number of subjects. Among the free programmes developed for children with ASD in this field, we can recommend the game "Early counting skills – Autism"<sup>12</sup>, which trains counting up to 5, and the programme "Number sequence – autism series"<sup>13</sup>, which helps to remember the sequence of numbers.

### Mastering reading

Experts note that autistic children perceive information in "blocks", so the syllabic teaching method is not always suitable for them, they perceive the word as a whole and

<sup>8</sup> O. S. Nikolskaya; E. R. Baenskaya y M. M. Libling, *Autistic child: ways to help* (Moscú: Terevinth, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> SpeakColors. Application. RWH Technology. Copyright 2011–2019. URL: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/speakcolors/id459123512?mt=8> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

<sup>10</sup> Show me colors. Autism series. Free Education APP. Version 1.0.8, 2019. URL: <https://apkpure.com/show-me-colors-autism-series/air.ShowMeColors> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

<sup>11</sup> O. S. Nikolskaya; E. R. Baenskaya y M. M. Libling, *Autistic child...*

<sup>12</sup> Early counting skills. Autism. Free Education APP. Version 1.0.9, 2018. URL: <https://apkpure.com/ru/early-counting-skills-autism/air.Earlycountingskills> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

<sup>13</sup> Number Sequence. Autism Series. Free Education APP. Version 1.1.2, 2019. URL: <https://apkpure.com/ru/number-sequence-autism-series/air.Numbersequence> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

can learn to recognize words in printed form<sup>14</sup>. Thus, even subtitles on television can help<sup>15</sup>. Therefore for teaching them to read the method of ‘global reading’ is proposed, with which items are signed with whole words. Some teachers use Glenn Doman’s method for teaching children with ASD to read in English<sup>16</sup> originally developed for teaching all the children under one year. Due to good involuntary memory, children with ASD usually remember alphabet easily and play with letters, as with numbers, but have difficulty connecting them into words. To teach the English alphabet any traditional programme can be used, for example, Phonics Song 2 by KidsTV123<sup>17</sup>, which allows children to connect the sound of the letter itself and the sound that it transmits in their minds, as well as memorize some items that start with a certain letter and thereby expand their vocabulary. Experts note that the use of songs in working with autistic children allows them to expand their knowledge base, stimulates speech development, and promotes successful inclusion in the classroom<sup>18</sup>.

### Teaching writing

When teaching children with ASD to write in English, it is recommended to use their abilities to copy, imitate and visually memorize. It is much easier for children with ASD to type on a computer than to write by hand, but in order to develop fine motor skills, both skills should be trained. Some children at the initial stage should be held by the hand while writing, gradually reducing support. The authors of the fundamental work “Work in Progress” propose to divide the process of teaching the letter to children with ASD to the following main stages: 1) circle letters and numbers on lined paper; 2) circle, copy and write the child’s name; 3) copy letters and numbers; 4) write letters and numbers (when the student learns to distinguish between them); 5) match individual letters with words in order from left to right; 6) copy from the school board; 7) writing vocabulary dictations; 8) writing suggestions – answers to questions<sup>19</sup>.

### Teaching phrase-making

Teaching children with ASD simple phrases in their native language is usually based on the use of PECs cards that help such children to express their wishes (I want ..., I do not want ...). Data cards are part of some computer applications developed for Russian-speaking children with ASD, for example “Govori molcha: Autism Dialog” (Speak keeping silent: Autism Dialogue)<sup>20</sup>, in which parents have the opportunity to optimize the programme, taking into account the needs of their child. For a child familiar with the programme in the native language, its analogues in other languages can be used for teaching similar phrases in new languages.

<sup>14</sup> O. S. Nikolskaya; E. R. Baenskaya y M. M. Libling, Autistic child...

<sup>15</sup> T. Grandin, Teaching Tips for Children and Adults with Autism. 2002. URL: <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/Teaching-Tips-for-Children-and-Adults-with-Autism> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

<sup>16</sup> T. H. Kolomoiets y D. A. Kassim, “Using the Augmented Reality to Teach of Global Reading of Preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorders”, CEUR Workshop Proceedings num 2257 (2018): 237–246 y S. Doman, What is the Doman Method? URL: <https://www.domaninternational.org/blog/what-is-the-doman-method-by-spencer-doman> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

<sup>17</sup> Phonics Song 2. KidsTV123. 2009 URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BELIZKpi1Zs&app=desktop> (accessed: 28.05.2018).

<sup>18</sup> R. Leaf y D. Macken, Behavioral Strategies. Curriculum for Intensive...

<sup>19</sup> R. Leaf y D. Macken, Behavioral Strategies. Curriculum for Intensive...

<sup>20</sup> Speak Silently: Autism Dialogue. Free Education APP. Version 1.0 URL: <https://captain-droid.com/games/for-kids/govori-molcha-autizm-dialog/> (accessed: 05/28/2018).

## Summary

Thus ASD is a complex developmental disorder, characterized by stereotypical acts, limited special interests, challenges in communication, specific pragmatics and amazing talents and abilities. So consequently the success in learning ESL depends on the professionalism and a special approach of the teachers, who may use those peculiarities to their benefit. So special education is required in this field. We agree with Saifullova et al. insisting that the image and the role of the teacher has changed nowadays, and to be successful in their work modern teachers should practice their skills constantly<sup>21</sup>. Understanding the nature of ASD should help the teacher to adapt

## Conclusions

In conclusion it is necessary to point out that, although ASD is accompanied by rigid behavioural patterns, occasional developmental delays and numerous challenges in communication with the outside world, it is still worldwide acknowledged that mastering ESL can contribute to the development of mind, memory, logic and speech in ASD children and besides broaden their horizons. It contributes to the development of neural connections between both hemispheres, increases a child's self-esteem and helps to acquire academic skills. But on the other hand it should also be noted that if we deal with hyperactivity, restlessness, aggression, both physical and verbal, we need to prioritize behavioural issues over academic knowledge and first try to develop eye-contact or 'cool hands', the ability to sit still, and above all, mutual trust, establishing our contact with the child.

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<sup>21</sup> R. Saifullova et al., "The Social Status of Teachers and Education in the Russian Empire of the Second Half of the XIX Century", *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* Vol: 9 num 3 (2018): 97–108.



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