

Autistic Spectrum Disorders and learning foreign languages

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Abstract

The number of young people with a diagnosis of an Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) coming into mainstream foreign languages classes is increasing, and this is causing some concern to teachers. Based on her extensive professional experience, Vivienne Wire here considers the implications for teaching and learning of the 'triad of impairments' found in pupils with autism and discusses strategies for intervention. In addition, positive aspects of an autistic person's style of learning are suggested, which may help classroom relationships, pupil motivation and behavioural issues. It is hoped that the issues raised in this article will promote the importance to young people with autism of learning a foreign language and explain how issues of structure and organisation, which lie beyond the triad, are of equal significance in meeting the needs of children and young people with autism.

Introduction

Across the UK, as elsewhere, teachers are finding more pupils with autism coming into their foreign languages classrooms. These young people are likely to have a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism, and for the majority of teachers who have received little or no training in strategies for this group; their arrival in ever increasing numbers is causing some concern. Autism is a lifelong pervasive developmental disorder, or rather a spectrum of disorders, which most likely includes Asperger syndrome. Disorders on the spectrum have in common three particular areas of difficulty - an impairment in social interaction, in social communication, and in imaginative and flexible thinking. This article aims to provide a little of the background to Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and to suggest some strategies which may be helpful both to foreign language teachers and to their learners with autism.

Background

In secondary schools, there is still a significant tranche of teachers who trained in the late 1960s/early 1970s, at a time when autism had been identified officially for less than 25 years and Asperger syndrome was almost completely unknown. The psychologists, Leo Kanner in the USA (1943) and Hans Asperger in Austria (1944), published their research – independently of each other – on groups of young people with characteristics now called autistic. Autism – the word coming from the Greek word for 'self' – had probably always existed, and indeed there are earlier, fragmented reports worldwide of people displaying

autistic characteristics. But as Kanner's research findings were scientifically validated, his writings have become the benchmark for classic low-functioning autism. Asperger, on the other hand, who had written in German describing his focus group, received little plaudit or acknowledgement until his findings were translated and discussed by Wing (Wing and Gould, 1979; Wing, 1981), when they were greeted with great interest.

Controversy about the causes, prevalence and diagnostic criteria for what are now most often referred to as 'Autistic Spectrum Disorders' (ASD) continues, but discussion of these is not relevant here. It is perhaps worth commenting that a diagnosis of autism is more likely than formerly. A greater awareness among a range of professionals whose work brings them into contact with children and young people will be playing some part in the rise of those diagnosed. However, recent figures suggest the current prevalence rate in the UK population for all those with ASD is at least as high as 1:147 (Fombonne, 2001). Fombonne's research also documents an increase of 1300% over the past twenty-five years. Thus it is likely that ASD is here to stay and, as recent legislation has introduced a presumption of mainstreaming, it may be useful to raise awareness of potential issues for teachers of pupils with autism so that both teacher and pupil have a really positive experience in a foreign language class.

Pupils now coming into mainstream schools are likely to be diagnosed with high functioning autism or Asperger syndrome. Asperger syndrome, described by Frith (1991) as 'a dash' of autism, is the diagnosis where, alongside other specific criteria, language develops normally, even precociously, in a young child. High-functioning autism is a relative term, given to the minority of those diagnosed as autistic who do not have considerable learning difficulties. It is important to think of autism as a spectrum, but also to remember that wherever someone is placed on the spectrum, there is always the so-called triad of impairments (Wing, 1996). This is the crux of autism and, as it is evident even in those with a very high level of cognitive ability, therefore requiring acknowledgement on the part of the teacher, the three aspects of the triad will now be discussed. In this article, I use the personal pronoun he/his (there is a ratio of around four male: one female at the higher functioning end of the autistic spectrum) but she/her is intended as well.

The triad of impairments

First, in autism there is always an impairment in social interaction. This means a difficulty in social conversation and quite often discomfort around others, resulting in an off-hand or rude social manner. There may be a disinterest even dislike of working in a group or pair and a strong preference for being allowed to work independently and alone. Learning a foreign language can make a useful contribution to raising an autistic pupil's awareness of social skills, right from early attempts at social 'meetings and greetings'. Modelling and prompting by the teacher and selected pupils and the strategies described later may be helpful.

The second aspect of the triad is unusual social communication. This means these pupils' voices may be too soft or loud, they may have speech that is garbled and long-winded, or too brief, and there may be elective muteness, or echoing of words and phrases. Some find direct eye contact with others difficult, even painful, and may focus on the mouth or a point beyond the face, but this does not mean they are not noticing everything through their peripheral eye vision. In a subject such as foreign languages where oral communication is so important, patience and prompting are required, but this subject has the potential to help the pupil with

autism communicate more appropriately, as all pupils have to demonstrate their ability to understand others and equally be understood by them.

The third aspect of the triad is a lack of flexibility, which can be seen in varying ways. Perhaps an important issue for the classroom teacher is the real difficulty most pupils with autism have in coping with change. It may well take them time to get used to a new school, new teachers and possibly a new subject. These pupils may not like it if a supply teacher takes over and varies the routine, so prior warning to the pupil can help. The challenge many have with change is displayed daily, even hourly, in school, for example when the bell rings and there is a change of location and lesson. Pupils with autism find it particularly hard to adjust first thing in the day, when they are making the transition from home to school, and they may be quite uncooperative during the first lesson of the day. Changes throughout the day will affect them, for example, going from PE to French (often slow to get changed, because of organisational issues); break/lunchtime to French (going from unstructured time, which they don't always enjoy, to a structured lesson); science to French (different area of school, so they may get lost, or 'teased' going along corridors or across the playground).

In these examples, the pupil with autism may arrive at the languages class highly distracted. If there are a lot of instructions in the foreign language from the teacher, without some kind of visual support on the board, it is likely that he, and perhaps a few others in the class, may get behind since some find processing such verbal information difficult. This pupil may not have heard, and cannot then follow, the instructions already given, and may anger the teacher by speaking back when challenged to 'get organised quickly'. It is possible that he will still be trying to find textbooks and exercise books in his packed schoolbag (which probably has not been cleared of school letters home and PE kit to be washed!) when everyone else has started on the first task. Once started, his pace in doing the tasks may be slower than others' and he may need prompting and motivating to continue. The result can be that the pupil gets more and more behind, and frustration and stress build up for pupil and teacher. Sometimes the end result is the pupil being withdrawn from the languages class— an unnecessary and undesirable outcome. An awareness of this particular difficulty for pupils with autism may assist the teacher to support these pupils appropriately at times of transition.

The lack of flexibility may also be displayed in a strict appliance of rules – either classroom/school ones or his own. This is not a pupil who knowingly breaks established classroom rules and his adherence to rules can make him unpopular with his peers and liable to retaliation later. A hand may be readily raised to 'tell on' the boy at the back who is not following instructions or is touching a piece of equipment which pupils are not supposed to touch. This tendency needs careful supervision: for example by directing such a pupil to have a quiet word with you, the teacher, only when pupil safety is threatened, and not during lesson time. Often this pupil does not want anyone else writing in his exercise book, or using a different colour of pen or pencil. His pencils and books may be neatly lined up on the desk. He may become upset if he cannot sit in a particular chair, even though to anyone else they all look like identical black plastic chairs. Many have a very literal understanding of words and phrases and have a difficulty understanding that these sometimes have more than one meaning. For example, an instruction to the class not to use a 'red pen or pencil' in exercise books may result in the pupil not using a pencil whose casing is red. Colloquial expressions, such as saying you have 'a frog in your throat', can cause alarm to some, although high functioning pupils do learn these colloquialisms. Sometimes, they learn these subtleties the hard way: for example, John is being reprimanded by a teacher for losing a French textbook.

‘That book cost a fortune, John’ rants the teacher. “I wouldn’t exactly say a fortune, Sir’ says the pupil, to an even more enraged teacher.

On the positive side, however, the lack of flexibility associated with pupils with autism is complemented by a liking for routine, rote learning and lots of repetition. They may apply themselves well to learning vocabulary, numbers, set phrases and grammar, taught in a straightforward way, and thus acquire a good basic grounding that helps them through the more challenging social interaction side of learning a language.

All these autistic characteristics may cause stress and potential difficulty in accessing the curriculum if they are not tackled sensitively. Furthermore, beyond the triad described above, there may be other issues that affect them adversely. Sometimes, there are others in the family with ASD (or a ‘shadow’ of it), which may have an effect on family dynamics and level of support given to home issues that affect schoolwork. With their love of routine and predictability, home life for these young people can sometimes be especially stressful if there is little structure and they perhaps have siblings who destroy some of their precious, well-ordered belongings.

There may well be other factors unconnected with autism, such as epilepsy, or other features that can affect their work in school, for example, poor gross or fine motor skills. While impaired gross motor skills will mainly affect their competence in PE, poor fine motor skills may result in slow, laboured writing, a reluctance to do any writing at all and a pace of working which is slower than the rest of the class. A few on the autistic spectrum may have a diagnosis of dyspraxia, and a laptop may be of great assistance to them in lessons. Some have a dual diagnosis of ASD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) which can result in poor concentration and quite disruptive behaviour. A number of young people with ASD may have a specific ‘dyslexic’ learning difficulty, which makes learning vocabulary and reading the foreign language much harder for them than others and can quickly lead to some frustration and resistance to this subject. A multi-sensory approach is now acknowledged as being a great help to pupils with dyslexia as well as many others (Crombie & McColl, 2001), including those with ASD. However, it is important to recognise the important differences between these types of difficulty. remember that barriers to the curriculum caused by dyslexia and autism are very different and indeed may be complementary to each other (Wire, 2002). Those with Asperger syndrome have some ability with language in its widest sense, hence their huge potential in learning a new language, but have difficulty with abstraction and creativity. Those with dyslexic difficulties tend to find reading and spelling their main area of difficulty, but they are frequently highly creative.

Strategies to help the learner with autism access the curriculum

Teachers are involved in learning strategies in two obvious ways: knowing about, supporting, managing and occasionally teaching the strategies used by their students, and using a range of strategies of their own.

(McDonough, 1995, p.84)

It is important for teachers of a pupils with autism to understand their pupils’ learning strategies, which may differ from those of other pupils, and also to develop appropriate strategies themselves to develop the potential of these young people. They need to accept that their may be difficulties in accessing the foreign languages curriculum for a pupil with ASD

because of the triad of impairments, even if the pupil at first sight appears not to display these. This in itself is one of the problems: the teacher needs to be prepared to accommodate the quirky way of working some pupils in order to access the curriculum and make progress,

Strategies for helping young people with ASD in social interaction.

Social interaction is a crucial part of foreign languages work and the pupil with ASD can potentially derive enormous benefit from interaction with others, which may enhance the quality of his whole future. The foreign language class may be one of the few times of the day when a pupil with ASD has to engage another pupil in a conversation, and it is therefore important for their, and others' social development. Littlewood (1998) has noted that the extrovert type of pupil may be more proficient in learning a second language, not because of a natural superiority in ability but because she or he engages in more social action and thus has more opportunities to learn. Those less extroverted, which would include learners with autism, many find 'difficulties relating to others and presenting their own selves adequately' owing to 'their limited communicative competence' which could affect their progress (p.59).

Some basic groundwork may have to be done, as pupils with autism in particular, do not instinctively want to interact with others, particularly their peer group. Modelling what is required by the teacher and a suitable pupil is helpful. The pupil with autism may be keen to interact with the teacher and regularly put his hand up to answer questions, but be totally averse to working in a pair or group of fellow pupils. Building up a relationship patiently with this pupil, sometimes by interacting directly with him in class may be helpful, or pairing him with, for example a mature pupil who can gently direct and prompt him.

Experience suggests that pairing him with the 'coolest' kid in class or the class sporting hero should be avoided as they may have little in common. Also to be avoided is (another) know-it-all, who may distress the student with Asperger's considerably. In general, avoid anyone who may agitate and frighten this pupil disproportionately, even where there is no actual bullying and teasing. A good choice of partners, on the other hand, can be extremely significant and affect how he copes in school. It may mean he can get to know someone with whom he can spend time at break and lunchtime, and thus may make the difference between success and failure in a mainstream situation.

A pupil with autism may need his own body space and sometimes to rock in his seat (sometimes when stressed, but also when excited), and may become irritable if obliged to sit too closely to others. Crucially, he may find interaction difficult if he is still preoccupied with organisational issues at the start of a class and misses the instructions in the foreign language for the task. It is therefore helpful for pupils with ASD, as for others, if there is a visual prompt (activity and page number) on the board to which they can refer and if some small concession is made in allowing extra time for self-organisation. It would be best for the teacher sometimes to address the pupil by name, and to speak reasonably slowly, avoiding multiple instructions. Encourage him to keep his French textbook and exercise book (and pencil) together in a folder, and colour-code them similarly if possible. It may well be only when these organisational issues are resolved that worthwhile, effective interaction in the foreign language can take place.

Strategies to help the pupil with ASD in social communication.

The foreign language has an important part to play in ‘regularising’ delivery and speech patterns of these pupils’ verbal communication. Frequently the pupil with ASD speaks too quickly, garbling what he is saying, and often the volume is inappropriately loud or soft. However, even those who have little speech, possibly an elective mute, may have a good understanding of the foreign language and may be able to respond by actions in role-play, by nodding, by drawing and by participating with a pocket translator. A video camera or cassette player (or other suitable and available technology) can allow playback, thus illustrating to the pupil with autism a voice that is inappropriate in volume or speed. If a pupil is reluctant to be recorded, and many are, it is worth taking time to remove pressure and record anything and everything in ‘fun’ lessons, thus making recording such an integral part of the lessons that it no longer causes fear. This not only removes a barrier to one aspect of assessment in the foreign language, but may help them also in Music or English assessments, and most importantly, it allows the pupil to see a positive result from his shift of attitude.

The pupil with Asperger’s syndrome who speaks too much does need some redirection, as monopolising classroom airtime can antagonise their peers and irritate the teacher. There may be irrelevant stories, long and pedantic explanations, interruptions and complaints, and some of these inevitably come across as rudeness. It is best to listen to at least part of the monologue, bringing it to a close at the earliest opportunity (in the foreign language if likely to be understood) – ‘Thank you John for your contribution. That was great’ – and move swiftly on. Also, the teacher may think a pupil downright cheeky when he puts a literal interpretation on an instruction (‘sing out when you’re finished’), when this type of interpretation is a fundamental part of the impairment.

Sometimes a social story (which the support for learning/guidance department may be able to help with) may be helpful. Briefly, it puts the pupil at the centre of the story, which is both descriptive and directive. The idea is for the story to be read on more than one occasion, perhaps at home as well as with suitable professionals in school. and is best used before a particular behaviour becomes an established routine. It could, for example, address the autistic pupil’s difficulties in getting organised quickly in class. Excellent examples, which can be a source of inspiration, are found in ‘My Social Stories Book’ (Gray & White, 2002).

Strategies for working with lack of flexibility.

Tackling the third impairment of the triad gives the teacher the greatest challenge, but is one which must be met to prevent the learner with autism from becoming highly stressed. Littlewood (1998) has noted that ‘a learner who is anxious in the classroom makes slower progress’, and goes on to discuss whether the anxiety causes slower progress, or the other way round (p. 53). Pupils with autism, perhaps, have a ‘double whammy’ here, as they are made anxious by external factors, thus impeding their progress, and simultaneously become anxious when they make slow progress, because most like to get a task completed in the due time. Autistic pupils’ need for routine means they flourish in a tightly structured classroom, where repeated greetings and predictable routines provide some ‘scaffolding’. The same daily greetings and conversation, simple instructions with visual back up, drills learnt and revisited often and clear classroom rules all help learners with autism. Useful strategies are, for example, to establish a seating plan that remains relatively constant, preferably seating this pupil at the front, beside a mature member of his peer group and to minimise distractions

wherever possible in the classroom as these can make concentration on learning harder. Some have either a hyper- or hypo- sensitivity to sensory input. Flickering lights, for example, the hum of a projector or computer, excessive heat or crowding, flapping blinds, a door that does not close properly, a loudly ticking clock – all these may be distracting to some. Particular chairs, seating arrangements or stationery can carry immense importance. Some pupils cannot leave their work until the page is completed or the writing is perfectly formed and become distressed if anything (or anyone, including the teacher) messes up their page. However, preparing pupils such as these for some occasional changes to ‘greetings and seatings’ so that they do not close down and refuse to work if there is a change to the usual routine, due perhaps to teacher illness or room relocation, is important.

Obsession, both positive and negative, with one particular subject goes hand in hand with this inflexibility. Ideas on how these can be utilised positively will be given in the following section on ‘strengths’. However it is important to find out what or whom pupils with ASD really dislike, as this can affect their concentration and ability to learn. These may be in relatively predictable areas, such as ‘crowds’, ‘bullies’, ‘thunder storms’ or ‘fire alarms’, but their fear may go beyond what others consider normal. Dislikes or fears may be quite random, for example: ‘corners’, ‘blades of grass’, ‘round shapes’, ‘tightrope walking’.

Strengths of pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Having worked with pupils with ASD over several years, I am very much aware of their strengths and keen to contradict the widespread view they are unlikely to make much progress in a foreign language and that this subject should be the first one to be discarded. I believe that the difficulty in adjusting to change when transferring to secondary school, where there are constant moves from one subject and room to another, is a serious problem for them and is particularly noticeable in relation to the foreign language class. It is a real challenge for these pupils to get organised quickly at the start of the class. Instructions in the foreign language are easily missed and this, rather than lack of ability, may also account for poor attainment in the early stages of learning a language. Those who receive some support for these issues, and don’t miss out on the early stages of a new language, can go on to achieve well. One example, of many, is ‘Don’ – one of Kanner’s original research subjects – who, it was noted in a follow up study (1971), went on to ‘major’ in a foreign language and was said to show a particular aptitude for languages.

There is an aspect to their lack of flexibility which can be used constructively by the foreign languages teacher: their love of routine. These are pupils who will go over and over familiar material, and some even become quite excited about returning to familiar phrases, sequences, drills, games, numbers and lists. This helps them to build up the ‘knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically for speaking and understanding’ (Lightbrown & Spada, 2000), which are a necessary part of the structure required in an autistic pupil’s learning process. Once the languages teacher has established his/her presence, rules and expectations, this pupil will prefer you to the novelty others might find in a supply teacher. They will thrive in a highly structured teaching environment, where discipline is firm but fair, and the aims of each lesson are clear to them and supported visually.

As far as handling language is concerned, many of those diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome have good general language skills from an early age, and will have coped competently with work in their first language in primary school, before coming to another

language. They may well have been good, even precocious, readers and can have an excellent range of unusual words within their conversational speech. Quite a few adopt a non-local accent for their everyday speech – frequently an American one, although there can be some surprises. Interestingly, this phenomenon also exists in the USA also, where, it is said, a city kid may adopt a ‘hillbilly’ accent. These pupils tend to be good ‘literal’ mimics of the foreign accent and lack the self-consciousness of their peer group in trying to copy a foreign accent accurately from the teacher or tape. They have the potential to have the best accents in the class.

Once organised for the lesson and provided there are no distractions (like flickering lights) these pupils should be able to work well with the new language. Most with Asperger syndrome have good memories for rote learning and some have a fascination for using this new code for familiar objects. Most can achieve functional competence quite easily, in what has been called phatic language use, by performing language functions in communication skills such as ritual enquiries about health, weather and basic social contacts with others (Duda & Riley, 1990, p.29).

A few of those with Asperger syndrome have written of their life experiences using a different language to their native tongue, and there does seem to be a liking for adopting another persona and hiding behind interesting new words. I know of a highly autistic, almost mute boy in a base for pupils with ASD who does not readily engage with many subjects. However, he really shows an interest when a languages lesson starts and remembers French words when times tables are quickly forgotten. Yet this pupil would certainly have been withdrawn from a languages class in most school situations.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of those with ASD have at least one subject of special interest and one or more pockets of real ability. This may be skill in using a computer, which often make more sense to them than people, or a particular talent, for example, in music or drawing. Helping them use these skills in your class could take the form of a well-researched topic on which they have a store of facts and figures, in fact encyclopaedic knowledge, which they may deliver by way of a long monologue to the unwary listener. Interests are as varied as these youngsters themselves. However, some specialist subjects I have come across have include detailed knowledge about all sorts of animals and reptiles, ancient and modern; methods of transport; cartoon characters; mythical monsters; television ‘soaps’; machinery – and much mores. Their particular interest could perhaps sometimes be used imaginatively and constructively in lessons, or be given as the subject of a short talk in the foreign language. Some time could be given to it as a reward for a task accomplished, which in turn could keep the pupil’s interest. It is particularly important to give these pupils reasons and motivation for what they are being asked to do, as Gardener & Lambert (1972), cited in Ellis (1985), have noted that in acquiring a second language motivation plays as important a part as aptitude.

It seems sensible not to assume that the pupil with autism will react in the same way to topics that other pupils may find especially boring (or interesting). For example, some find a chapter in the textbook on means of public transport a little dull – but not this pupil, to whom it may be a sheer delight! Asperger noted in his original 1944 research that some of his researched group had a particular interest in transport and had memorised the names of the tram stops around Vienna. It is not at all unusual to find those who can recite the names of London underground stations or complex bus routes across their home city.

Many of those with Asperger syndrome have ability with numbers and, as the possibilities to use this within foreign language learning are infinite, you can involve the pupil in making up number games for the class. Be warned, however, that they may be better at mathematical calculations than you, the languages teacher, and have a very individual method of reaching the answers! Those who like to draw could sometimes be allowed to illustrate answers to show comprehension: one pupil I know dislikes doing a lot of writing but can do immensely subtle cartoon drawings. Incorporate using a computer, CD ROMs and associated technology into as much teaching and learning as possible, and perhaps allow the use of a laptop where appropriate. A high proportion of pupils with autism have access to a computer and the internet at home (perhaps parents have found that computer games and information seeking soothes stress their offspring may be feeling), so homework tasks, including factual investigations, could be set to be done on the computer at home.

In summary, it is important to find a way to motivate this pupil to learn a second language, and the best way to motivate them is to involve them actively in the learning process. As Rubin (1987) has noted, 'Learning is best achieved when the student plays an active role in the process' (p.17) – and this applies every bit as much to the pupil with autism as to any other pupil.

Conclusions

Pupils with ASD can present an interesting but worthwhile challenge to teachers, but it is important to motivate these pupils when learning a foreign language by drawing on their strengths. Teachers need to have some knowledge of what the issues are surrounding autism in order to be able to help these pupils to access the curriculum and to build on their undoubted strengths once identified. So, is the case made that pupils with autism can achieve and should receive their entitlement to learning a foreign language? Or will doubts linger that these pupils are better withdrawn to do extra work on other subjects?

There is no doubt that many teachers may remain worried that they have not received enough training to cope with these sort of difficulty. This applies even to recently qualified foreign languages teachers who have received only a little input regarding such additional support needs, or strategies to address them during their period of initial training.

I believe that in order to help pupils with ASD to a successful outcome in foreign languages lessons, it is crucial to understand that such pupils, now coming into mainstream schools, probably do not have global learning difficulties. They do, however, require auxiliary or peer group assistance and a sensitive, aware approach from the teacher. This is less for supporting their learning and more for supporting their way of accessing the curriculum. Practical help with this may transform their school experience and may make success in the foreign language highly possible, reducing or eliminating their feeling of being 'a Martian in the playground' (Sainsbury, 2000). In doing so, they should have the opportunity to improve their social skills, have the challenge of acquiring language learning skills and have the chance to learn about other countries and cultures, just like other pupils.

In brief, pupils with ASD can succeed with foreign languages and teachers can work successfully with them. Provided they are helped to cope with transitions, changes and self-organisation and have some scaffolding put in place by the teacher, they are able to learn. By modelling good social communication and engineering appropriate social interaction and

looking for the positives in these pupils, much can be achieved in the classroom, with the knowledge that this may even have a significant long-term impact on their whole lives.

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