

Extract from:

**Special Educational Needs in Europe  
The Teaching and Learning of Languages  
Insights and Innovation**  
(pages 81-84)

**COMMUNICATION & INTERACTION DIFFICULTIES**

This contribution is by Vivienne Wire who works as a teacher in a Communication Disorder Unit (CDU) within a host Secondary School (Hillpark), in Glasgow, Scotland.<sup>65</sup> The focus here is on establishing the means and approach to ensure successful language learning with pupils who have autistic spectrum disorders.

**Background to the current position for the Secondary education and additional language learning of autistic pupils in Scotland**

Autism or Autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) are increasingly being recognised and diagnosed across all age groups in Scotland, as elsewhere in Europe. The cognitive range of the autistic spectrum varies from very low (the majority) to high-functioning, (which means from the top end of moderate learning difficulties to genius level). Those with the most profound autistic difficulties are likely to need lifelong care, and will be educated in a special, sometimes residential, school. For these individuals, many of whom are mute or have severely impaired communication, learning a foreign language is likely to be inappropriate. Whatever the cognitive level, or co-morbid impairments - such as ADHD, dyslexia or dyspraxia - all share the triad of Impairment, with difficulties in social interaction and communication, and a lack of flexibility.

Those at the upper cognitive end of the range are said to have High-Functioning Autism, or Asperger Syndrome - whose diagnostic criteria are slightly different. In this group, the ratio of male-female is 5:1. Numbers are increasing dramatically, probably through earlier and better diagnosis. Until recently, many went through school and foreign languages classes, with their Autism unrecognised and unsupported. They were often vulnerable to bullying because of their idiosyncrasies, and were misunderstood by teachers who found them challenging to work with. Some of this group can cope fairly well at Primary level with little or no support, but the situation for them socially, and therefore generally, at Secondary level often deteriorates, as they begin to appear a bit different, and distinctly uncool.

In Scotland, there is now a presumption of mainstreaming all of the higher functioning autistic pupils. Those who are identified as requiring help will usually receive it from the Support for Learning Team within the School.

**A Change of Approach**

Within the last decade, however, there has been a shift of opinion as to the best way to support ASD pupils at Primary/Secondary level, which is in the process of being established. It has been necessary to take into consideration that more with a diagnosis of Autism are now

appearing in schools. In Scotland, a solution has been to set up dedicated Autism units within host primary and secondary schools. These are often referred to as Communication Disorder Units (CDU). In the City of Glasgow, there are now 3 Primary and 3 Secondary CDUs, and most of the Education Authorities in the central belt (the highest population area in Scotland), either now have one, or are on the point of opening one.

The organisation and amount of actual teaching done in the CDUs varies considerably, as they principally serve the purpose of providing an autismfriendly support base or haven (as an alternative to the playground), staffed by specialist staff. Of the 3 CDUs in Glasgow City, Hillpark CDU has the most teaching within the unit, and a foreign language, French, is part of the CDU curriculum, so that these pupils receive their due entitlement to it. Importantly, as the time of transition from Primary to Lower Secondary school is particularly difficult for many pupils on the autistic spectrum, it allows an additional language to be introduced from the start in a quiet, relatively distraction-free environment.

Many educationalists are too quick, in my opinion, to jump to the conclusion that learning a second language is an unnecessary burden on such pupils who may be struggling with their social interaction and communication difficulties and readily withdraw them from the subject when difficulties arise. I believe it is a valuable subject for them and worth persevering.

### **Recent research on ASD pupils and foreign language learning**

I carried out research in 2002, which explored the experience of ASD Secondary level pupils learning a foreign language.

66 Secondary pupils with ASD (the tip of the iceberg), in mainstream/units, were identified by questionnaires sent out to different Education Authorities and of these 20% were, at that time, not learning a foreign language. There seemed to be an opinion that it was only worth continuing with an additional language where the pupil was co-operative and keen to learn, and that otherwise it was an unnecessary burden on a young person with a communication disorder.

Those who persevered found there were many advantages to be gained and that pupils would settle down into the subject and were potentially as able as any other. This concurs with the findings of the father of Autism, Leo Kanner, who did a follow-up to his original case studies of the 1940s, and found that Donald had progressed with learning a foreign language to a high level. Some articulate individuals with Asperger syndrome have even chosen a non-native tongue in which to write autobiographical observations, which corresponds with the liking of some to adopt a different persona (for example, in drama lessons).

The research highlighted that the difficulty some teachers of foreign languages have with certain ASD pupils relate as much as anything to a lack of information about what barriers to learning such pupils may have, how they could address them, and what strengths they have that can be helpful for learning a new language. In addressing these, the following strategies should be considered:

## Strategies to enhance the learning of a foreign language for ASD pupils

### Addressing Barriers

- A very structured, quiet classroom situation with obvious rules.
- Provision of written as well as verbal instructions. This may be crucial at the beginning of a class when they are coping with the transition from one lesson/classroom to another.
- Making allowance for some pupils' poor organisational ability. Help by colourcoding (for example, all green).
- Writing homework tasks in a diary and enlisting support of parents.
- Being aware that they are likely to find working co-operatively in a pair or group quite difficult, even if it should be gently encouraged for practising social interaction.
- Being cautious with direct eye contact. This is difficult for some pupils and can actually physically hurt them. It is necessary to try to avoid confrontation about their idiosyncrasies. For example, their voice may be too loud/quiet in volume, too fast and garbled, or accented in an unusual way.
- Helping with organisational study features. For example, these pupils can find it very hard to leave a task incomplete or imperfect in some respect. Some have strong feelings about writing with a particular pen or pencil, not tearing a page out, or not using a dirty eraser.
- Appreciating the sense of being different that some of these pupils feel. One articulate young woman with Asperger syndrome has described being in the school playground with other youngsters as feeling as if she were a Martian from outer space. Others have used similar terminology. Using Strengths
- Focusing on preferred learning orientation. These pupils may have areas of the curriculum where they have real strength and interest. Computing is one – machines may well make more sense to them than people. Many show ability in mathematics and science, which may appeal because they concern concrete facts/figures rather than abstract concepts (such as poetry). Some will have special talent in music or technical subjects. Generally subjects involving gross motor skills are less appealing.
- Utilising the characteristic good rote memory learning skills, for example, simple facts and figures, vocabulary and patterns for verbs.
- Focusing on production of accented speech. As they are quite literally minded, these pupils will often mimic a foreign accent without any self-consciousness to make it sound localised.
- As they usually have encyclopaedic knowledge of some subjects, these should be incorporated into foreign language learning activities, homework or projects to increase their interest. For example, a chapter in a textbook on 'transport' can be expanded to learn extra-related vocabulary, practice numbers, and learn verbs relating to travel.

- Concentrating on enhanced reading skills. Often they are excellent fluent readers from an early age and have good general verbal ability.

### **The future of ASD pupils learning a foreign language**

With the presumption now of mainstreaming high-functioning autistic pupils, young people with ASD entering secondary schools will certainly encounter some challenges in foreign language learning, but these will relate more to problems in social interaction and communication than to a lack of cognitive ability.

Teachers of foreign languages may need to become more accommodating of ASD pupils' typical, but often unpredictable, quirky behaviour and idiosyncrasies. Expecting them to fit the standard pupil mould will only add an extra layer of stress. Inclusion means some adaptation of mainstream expectation, and a need to provide an environment where pupils can feel comfortable and achieve their potential. Pupils on the autistic spectrum will not work well or fulfil this potential where teachers shout at them for poor organisational skills, inappropriate speech or comments, or for their difficulties doing group work. This only causes the pupils undue stress.

Wherever possible, pupils with ASD should be offered appropriate support, from those who have knowledge of the nature of Autism. This may well require an increase in the numbers of foreign language teachers becoming specialised in this field.

So how will it be obvious that such strategies are working? The young person will be achieving his /her potential, becoming almost invisible in the foreign language classroom, indistinguishable from those who are doing the work/homework of the class, and attaining well in assessments. They will answer confidently in oral work, speaking with impressively authentic accents, and will have mastered a bank of vocabulary and structures. They will pass examinations and possibly continue to a higher level, or simply have amassed enough of the foreign language to serve them well enough in the future.

This will only be achieved when teachers and educationalists acknowledge that these young people can do very well in learning foreign languages but also when the classroom experience and teacher's approach have been subtly differentiated to suit them.

### **Note**

The whole EU document, or an Executive Summary, can be downloaded at:  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/key/studies\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/key/studies_en.html)