

Autism Q&A No 2: How to respond to colleagues who are sceptical about teaching second language to learners on the autism spectrum

Question

I am a faculty member in the department of foreign language education at [a university]. With a college in special education here, we are hoping to carry out a research study on autism and language learning in [this country]. Special education is a developing field here, and Autism research and teaching centers are scarce. And despite the conception based on current research (e.g., European Commission) that students must have equal rights and access to foreign language education, the widespread view here contends that individuals with autism can hardly handle their first language, let alone learning another one. Stories I hear and read about people with autism who know multiple languages (I have actually read online just today about a female who speaks 8 languages) are nothing but urban legends for most people, some of them are unfortunately special education teachers themselves. As I was searching for materials on the topic, I came up with your 2005 article. I wanted to write and thank you for your work [and ask for your comments].

Answer

I am very aware of the difficulties modern language teachers face when passionate about teaching a foreign language to children with autism – the difficulties coming mainly from misconceptions about autism from colleagues who indeed often take the view that they have enough trouble with their native language so why bother with another.

I think the main issue here is lack of education on autism in many "civilised" western countries, which means that many educated people pick up snippets of information about autism from the media, or perhaps a one hour 'introduction to autism', and make a wrong assumption that expectations for all those with autism should be the same (i.e. very limited). This fails to distinguish between those on the autism spectrum who have no language whatsoever, coupled with one or more additional special needs, and those at the higher end of the spectrum. I am not talking here about the rare "genius" or "savant", but about those learners who have some language or have been identified as able to understand and communicate (even non verbally). I believe that learners in this category will be able to derive some benefit from learning another language even at a very basic level, as with language goes a widening of horizons and a glimpse into another culture which can only be beneficial.

Vivienne Wire, October 2010
<http://www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/autism.html>