

# Teaching English Discussion to Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Reflection

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the author's reflections on teaching English discussion classes containing learners diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It begins by summarizing ASD and typical impairments that ASD individuals may have, before discussing potential challenges in including ASD learners into classes with non-ASD (neurotypical) students. Through reference to both existing research and a teaching journal kept by the author, it then critically reflects on specific concerns the author faced, and discusses a range of strategies aimed at dealing with them. Finally, a summary is offered in order to propose guidance for future teachers of ASD learners.

## **INTRODUCTION**

English Discussion Class (EDC) is a compulsory course for all first-year students at Rikkyo University. Consisting of weekly 90-minute classes for a total of 28 weeks across two semesters, it forms a key part of Rikkyo University students' foreign language education. Furthermore, with small class sizes limited to a maximum of 9 students, EDC provides students with significant opportunities to develop their English speaking skills. When making teaching decisions—for example, material preparation, activity selection, and lesson pace—a critical concern for educators is how to ensure the lesson is suitable for all students, providing them with equal opportunities to meet their learning goals in a comfortable environment. This process is aided by assigning students to classes according to their English level (as assessed by TOEIC scores); however, the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SENs) can be challenging for both teachers and learners alike.

Across Japan, as well as other countries, teachers are increasingly experiencing students with disabilities entering their classrooms, which makes it an important concern for those working in education. Teachers may naturally feel a level of anxiety about learners with SENs, which may stem from a number of myths about the subject. Some examples may include the myths that you need be a specially trained teacher or psychologist to effectively include learners with SENs, that learners with SENs harm the progress of other learners in the classroom, or, in particular, that they cannot learn second languages well (Delaney, 2013). Focusing on autism spectrum disorder (ASD), this paper aims to debunk such myths and explore, with reference to the author's own experiences, how ASD learners may be included in English discussion classes specifically, and language classes in general.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although the term “autism” is used with increasing frequency in both the media and in daily life, it is still a condition that is misunderstood by many, including educators. Recent figures suggest it affects about 1 in 55 children in Japan (Kawamura, Takahashi, & Ishii, 2008). For context, it affects around 1 in 59 in the US (Baio et al., 2018). Furthermore, due to changes and improvements in identification and assessment criteria—the details and controversies of which are beyond the scope of this paper—these figures are steadily rising (Baio et al., 2018), which means that ASD is an increasingly relevant and important concern for educators.

Although educators are of course unable to diagnose ASD, and do not need a full clinical understanding of it, it is nonetheless useful to have an awareness of its central features in order to consider how ASD learners fit in the English classroom.

### **Definition of ASD and Relevance for the English Discussion Classroom**

A critical starting point to understanding the disorder—and thus becoming a more effective teacher of ASD learners—is recognition of the huge variety of behaviours, abilities, and experiences of those on the autism spectrum (Jarrett, 2014). Moreover, affected individuals are typically diagnosed with one of three types of ASD depending on the severity of their disability: Autistic Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Development Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals attending regular classes in mainstream universities are likely to be “high-functioning”, that is, although they meet some specific criteria for ASD diagnosis, they may have a normal or even high level of cognitive ability. Furthermore, their language development may be normal, and they do not have significant learning difficulties. However, all types of ASD typically involve deficiencies in three areas, often referred to as the ‘triad of impairments’ (Wing, 1996).

The first of these involves impairments in social interaction. Simply put, this means difficulty starting and maintaining conversations with others, as well as discomfort being around others, especially in unfamiliar environments (Wire, 2005). The ASD learner may then come across as withdrawn or rude, which can affect how others interact with them. In the English discussion classroom, this leads to a number of potential problem areas. For example, the student may experience discomfort even before the class starts, as the time between students arriving in the classroom and the bell ringing to signal the beginning of the lesson is often used by students to engage in casual small talk and get to know one another—interactions that ASD students may find difficult. Additionally, during the lesson, EDC typically involves students sat in close proximity with two or three classmates, and a high frequency of both pair work and group work, which may be challenging for the ASD learner.

The second impairment concerns social communication. Emphasizing the range of behaviours on the autism spectrum, teachers may notice that the learner speaks either too loud or too soft; their speech may consist of inadequately short utterances or unnecessarily long-winded statements (Wire, 2005). This has obvious impacts on discussion classes as the student’s speaking turns may be insufficient to answer the question posed to them or too long to the extent that they impact their classmates’ speaking time, both of which may affect the quality of their discussions in addition to their class grades. Furthermore, as Wire (2005) further notes, there may also be periods of elective muteness, possibly in response to discomfort. Finally, appropriate levels of eye contact can be either inconsistent or completely lacking, which may again influence the quality of English discussion, as well as the comfort levels of other classmates.

The third impairment relates to a lack of flexibility, and is perhaps the main area where the teacher can adjust their teaching decisions to aid an ASD learner. Primarily, this presents itself as difficulty in dealing with change, and can involve a range of areas. ASD individuals may experience stress or difficulty in dealing with changes both *between* and *within* lessons in a number of ways. For example, in terms of changes in location, discomfort may arise from physically traveling from one classroom to the next, or between buildings on campus. Within lessons, activities that involve standing up or moving around the classroom may also be problematic—in discussion classes, common activities such as 3-2-1 fluency, preparation stations, and changing discussion groups all must be re-examined (different lesson stages, including those specific to EDC, will be described in more detail below). Additionally, changes in topics may be difficult, again, both between and within lessons. For example, moving from history class in the first period to English class in the second period, and also transitions between lesson activities or different stages of the lesson, such as those from written quizzes, to targeted practice exercises, to in-depth discussions. Similarly, review lessons may be difficult as they involve covering material from a number of different weeks’ lessons.

The above can all be sources of discomfort or stress for an ASD individual, which can contribute to a number of further issues. For example, the presence of ASD learners in a classroom may require other learners to be more patient with them. On the other hand, ASD learners may be excluded from activities or, worse still, bullied. Therefore, such classes require consistent attention from the teacher to ensure all students have the best learning environment possible.

A final point for educators of ASD learners to be aware of is that there is often comorbidity of ASD with disabilities such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and dyspraxia, which may compound classroom issues (Leyfer et al., 2006). Again, as noted above, teachers should not, and are not expected to, diagnose or treat ASD or any related disabilities; however, an awareness of common related issues may help them do their best for the learners.

### **Strategies for Improving the Learning Environment**

While the above may make teaching ASD learners appear overly daunting, it is useful to restate here that ASD individuals in mainstream classrooms are likely at the high-functioning end of the spectrum, and that their language development and capacity for learning remains normal. However, flexibility in approaching ASD learners is key, as “the teacher needs to be prepared to accommodate the quirky way or working some pupils have [...] in order to make progress. (Wire, 2005, p. 125)

This section will now move on to consider a variety of strategies that may be helpful for language teachers. It follows the structure of a standard Rikkyo University EDC lesson in order to guide discussion class teachers more effectively. However, the contents will be familiar, and hopefully of use, to teachers of all English classes

#### ***Before the class***

For the teacher, this time is important as they need to ensure they are fully prepared. This process can start days or weeks before the class by, if appropriate, liaising with student support staff to get as much information as possible about the student. At Rikkyo University, students seeking special support, including those with disabilities such as ASD, are asked to contact the Center for Academic Affairs. From here, after discussions with the student, a document containing *requests for accommodations* will be distributed to their teachers. This provides information such as a summary of their disability, brief general guidance on class management, and what to do in the case of an emergency. It may also be useful, where possible, to contact the student’s previous teacher(s) who may be able to give more specific, detailed information. This information may include the student’s specific preferences for learning in addition to any relevant details about them. For example, it may include that the student is a stronger writer than speaker of English, or they may have a preferred partner in the class who is able to effectively work with them, so activities can be designed with these considerations in mind. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is flexibility will be key—activities may take longer than anticipated, or need adjusting in the moment according to their specific needs. Additionally, like all types of learners, ASD individuals may have good days or bad days, so teachers need to be understanding of these times.

#### ***Quiz***

Each EDC lesson begins with a short multiple-choice quiz based on a homework reading article (approximately 600 words), which the students have 2-3 minutes to complete. This is typically sufficient time to complete to quiz, but through observation, the teacher may deem it appropriate to allow an extra 30-60 seconds for this quiz, particularly as this is the very first activity of the class, and the ASD student may not have yet fully settled into the classroom.

### ***3-2-1 fluency***

Each EDC lesson typically includes a fluency activity, modified from Maurice's (1983) 4/3/2 activity. Briefly, it involves students taking turns speaking on a topic for 3 minutes, 2 minutes, and then 1 minute, with the goal of increasing speaking fluency through repetition of information under increasing time pressure. Students in EDC, like many classrooms, may typically settle into the habit of sitting in the same seats each lesson. This may be encouraged in classrooms with ASD learners as it may minimize their discomfort with change. However, 3-2-1 fluency activities are usually carried out standing up, with students switching partners after 3, 2, and 1 minute intervals. This type of activity may be confusing or stressful, so, depending on the learner's comfort levels, alternatives should be considered. Potential adaptations can involve students keeping the same partner throughout the activity, or performing it sitting down at their desks rather than standing up in a different part of the classroom.

### ***Target language presentation and practice***

Introducing new target language or functions to any student can be challenging due to the inherent uncertainty of learning how to correctly use new language. This can be even more true with ASD learners. Inductive methods, such as guided discovery, where learners must detect patterns or rules for themselves, are particularly difficult for ASD learners (Durig, 2004). Therefore, other, deductive or 'top-down' methods should be considered, and teachers should be prepared to explain points in alternative ways. For example, modelling (either with the ASD student or another student) may also take on additional importance in showing precise examples of how the target language should be used. Both research (e.g., Rao and Gagie, 2006) and my own experiences suggest that ASD individuals often prefer visual learning styles. For the teacher, this means preparing visual support for instructions and language in the form of either written words and/or pictograms. Moreover, having written instructions, either on the board in a handout, is preferable to only verbal instructions.

For the practice section, I found particular success with incorporating gap-fill activities here, as they appeal to their preferences for both structure and visual learning. The gap-fills can be completed first on paper, and then practiced verbally. Furthermore, if appropriate, allowing or encouraging students to prepare content before the class as homework can be useful. For example, in a lesson about popular Japanese culture, having the student prepare answers to questions such as "what are your favorite manga?" and "why" before class may reduce their in-class cognitive load regarding the actual target language itself.

Having noted above that consistency and routine are important, consider pairing students up with the same 1 or 2 partners. Teachers should continue to bear in mind that their output may be affected, and their answers may be either too short, or too long, and they may not be able to use the language as flexibly as other students. While modelling or feedback can help, the teacher should continue to be adaptable and aware of the student's potential limitations.

### ***Discussion and preparation***

Discussions in EDC usually last between 12-20 minutes depending on group sizes. Before this, a preparation stage allows students to generate content and share ideas. A common activity here involves students moving around the classroom between several posters, which each contain a question or prompt to help the students think about the topic they will subsequently discuss. However, this potentially lacks structure, which may cause stress. To minimize this and provide as much structure as possible, a timer should be used, which gives auditory cues that clearly signal transitions between posters and/or the end of this activity.

As noted above, ASD students here may contribute to discussions in different ways from

lesson to lesson, or from other students. In addition to being aware of this, the teacher may provide additional visual aids during discussion stages to aid both idea generation and target language production.

### ***Feedback and grading***

In principal, grading should be carried out in a way that is fair to all students, i.e. the ASD student should be graded according to the same rubric as their classmates. However, in certain cases it may be appropriate to liaise with program coordinators to adapt the grading criteria to ensure that ASD students have an equal opportunity to successfully complete the course and any assessments within. Examples may include allowing discussion activities to be completed textually, giving more time to discussions or other assessed activities, or emphasizing one part of the rubric over another (e.g., giving more points for ‘speaking turns’ than ‘follow-up questions’).

### ***Special interests***

Those with ASD are likely to have at least one area of special knowledge or one hobby which they take a keen interest in (Russell, Mataix-Cols, Anson, & Murphy, 2005). For example, it may be a particular sports team, a particular animation, or singer. Where possible, these may be encouraged and integrated into lesson materials for the individual, for example, being used as communication prompts during various lesson stages. In this way, they can be used as a motivation source.

### ***Balancing the needs of ASD learners with non-ASD learners***

This paper has so far largely focused on ASD members of the classroom. In mainstream classrooms such as EDC, it is unlikely that more than one of the members will have ASD, so where does that leave the other members? Other students may be frustrated with the pace of the lesson or with any extra support needed. There is also an increased risk of bullying and social exclusion, which the teacher must be prepared to deal with (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

In essence, a needs analysis of this classroom should be performed in much the same way as any mixed-ability classroom, which can avoid most problems. For example, including activities that allow individual students to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses allow them to focus on themselves. In terms of pair work or group work, while all classes have potential differences in ability or communication styles, these may be more pronounced in the case of mainstream classrooms with ASD members. It is recommended that ASD students work with students who the teacher judges to be the more mature members of the class, and that the teacher be prepared to take a trial-and-error approach to find the best combinations of classmates to work together.

## **CONCLUSION**

Teaching learners with any SENs, including ASD, can be equally challenging and rewarding. The aim of this paper is to provide starting points for those preparing to teach learners with ASD in EDC in particular, although the reflections above can be applied to many classrooms. In conclusion, two points should be emphasized. Firstly, with preparation focused on the individual student’s needs, adaptations can be successfully made to ensure that all learners have successful outcomes. Secondly, flexibility is important. While generalizations can aid an initial understanding of ASD learners, experts caution against the desire to “encapsulate autism in a single unifying theory” (Jarrett, 2014, para. 27). Similarly, this author would like to caution against the desire to find a one size fits all “guide” to ASD learners. There are a diversity of experiences with ASD and SEN learners, both for the learner and the teacher, so it is key to be as flexible as possible and consider the specific needs of the learner. This makes any writing about ASD learners inherently problematic. However, it is hoped that this article provides a useful starting point for educators

interested in creating inclusive classrooms for ASD learners.

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