OPENING PANDORA'S BOX; OR TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO A STUDENT WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME

Joanna Kozik[i],
Wioletta Rusin
Akademia Techniczno-Humanistyczna
w Bielsku-Białej, Poland

Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to discuss the issues related to FL (English) education in respect to the children with the clinically discovered Asperger Syndrome. In particular, we are planning to analyze the selected forms of motivation that might be applied to help such children learn a foreign language (mostly English) as well as to look into a number of possible ideas for motivating children to make them being visibly involved in various foreign language (further: FL) learning processes. One of the basic questions, which seem to aptly illustrate the considerations discussed here, refers mainly to the key role that English plays in the life of a man, both young and adult, as well as how much such linguistic knowledge can facilitate the development of an individual, Asperger-suffering children included.

Keywords: motivation; motivation to learn English; autism; Asperger's syndrome; disorder; FL teaching/learning; token system; motivational board

1. Asperger's syndrome: a form of autism, or a separate disorder?

Autism was diagnosed for the first time in 1943 by Leo Kanner, an Austrian-American child psychiatrist from Baltimore, who saw in eleven of his patients a specific behavior, one of its characteristic features being seemingly voluntary isolation from the world. This behavior was quite strange, as the small patients showed specific interests, such as spinning with jar lids, for example. Interestingly, any interference in habit, a small change in the environment, such as switching their favorite toys to another location without first agreeing with the child, resulted in causing visible panic, or even fear in the examined children. Some of the children could not speak, others used to repeat previously heard sounds. Kanner concluded that their behavior differs significantly from anything that could be read in available sources and/or other topical literature. He

---

[i] Correspondence: email joanna.kozik.ak@gmail.com

distinguished the name of autism - which comes from the Greek word "alone" (Greek: εαυτό), because the examined children felt great when in isolation.

By a strange coincidence, more or less a year after Kanner's famous publication, a Viennese physician, Hans Asperger, came across four young patients who also reported problems in social development, which, strangely enough, appeared despite generally normal cognitive and speech development; the leading problem the children were reported to possess was visible lack of contact with the environment, their parents included. However, in contrast to Kanner's patients from Baltimore, the children were able to build sentences and - what was important in their early cognitive development – the coped with the science subjects they had in school quite well (Silberman, 2015).

Asperger also classified these symptoms as autism, and, more specifically, his patients' behavior was referred to as autistic psychopathy. At that time, the etiology of the term "psychopathy" was a bit different from the one currently observed and was not so negatively perceived. However, as of today, it is not entirely clear if he was dealing with the same psychical syndrome as Kanner. As Silberman (2015) reports, over the next decades, autistic disorders remained at the same level, i.e. about 4-5 patients per 10,000 births. It is worth noting that the 80's and 90's brought a significant increase in births of children with this disorder.

2. Symptoms of a learner with the autistic spectrum

Neither Kanner nor Asperger decided to undertake further investigations in respect to the similarities and/or differences between the two disorders. Consequently, there is still a dispute over whether the Asperger's syndrome is a separate disorder or just a lighter form of autism. Following Cytowska, Winczura & Stawarski (2013), in 1992, the disorder Asperger had been observing was recognized and included by the World Health Organization (WHO) under the term Asperger's syndrome, and two years later, in 1994, the American Psychiatric Association used the term "Asperger's disorder" (DSM-IV; APA, 1994) to define the finding. In both cases, this disorder was classified as a complete developmental disorder.

One of the most problematic diagnostic aspects is the difference between Asperger's syndrome and autism. Asperger's problem refers to a fairly small group of highly functioning people with autism, with an average (at least) intelligence rating. The similarity of both described disorders is enormous and clearly increases during adolescence. The differences distinguished in the diagnostic criteria mostly concern the ones related to the following social areas:

- speech: in Asperger speech is normal, while in autism it is disturbed by the so-called echolalias, speaking in the third person and using short messages);
- social behavior: in autism one can discover intentional lack of eye contact and mutism, whereas in Asperger children are often straightforward[ii], tend to use

---

[ii] Behavior described as: *"one thing is only black and some other thing is only white", or "what's in the mind is on the tongue"* is often reported.

neologisms, like to talk about a favorite topic, may suffer because of lack of peer contacts, become fanatics of some idea, are not willing to reach compromises;

- compulsive (i.e. stereotypical) reactions: in autism movement occurs when some other thing moves or shines, this is why constancy of the environment is required, in Asperger problems with feeling the surrounding nature can be found;
- motor skills: autistic children are characterized with movement flexibility and neat muscular effect, whereas a child with Asperger's syndrome looks quite clumsy and helpless.

Criteria such as communication, motor development and language proficiency can determine the differences between children with either the Asperger's syndrome and/or autism, although the picture of both disorders varies between individuals. However, there are no significant differences in terms of visual and spatial abilities and the adoption of certain rigid patterns of behavior.

It should also be noted that another quite significant difficulty in diagnosing people with Asperger's syndrome rests in the differentiation with other developmental disorders, which concerns, among others, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

3. School and an Asperger's syndrome learner

School for a student with Asperger's syndrome seems to be "a kind of labyrinth" (Święcicka, 2016, p. 21), quite difficult for him/her to discover themselves in it; many Asperger patients describe this situation as a road they do not know where it leads, which can be both winding, bumpy, as well as extremely interesting or intriguing. Just like in the intricate corridors of a labyrinth, one never knows where to go or what to do to help such a child with Asperger's syndrome, nor how to help them get out of many difficult situations. Numerous halls, shouts of students in the corridor - all this can cause anxiety in Asperger-syndrome students.

A teacher working at school often faces a dilemma of how to help and how to work with a student with Asperger's syndrome; thus, a question concerning possible ways of mobilization for learning in respect to Asperger's syndrome learners, so that the whole educational process could not become a path of obstacles and bad experiences only, but the one where such learners could find pleasure, and even, in some cases, fun and interesting experience remains the one such teachers are bound to find and resolve as soon as possible.

This is why at the beginning of our considerations, it should be noted that every child diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome is different; therefore, one should never apply the same actions and methods to each student with this disorder. It should be remembered that there are no two children, where the intensity of symptoms is identical or even the same. Each child may behave differently, depending on their mood, interests, or even the approach applied during a lesson. So what does one do to

succeed? This paper does not aim to find a golden means, describing how to teach, or to show mistakes in respect to Asperger's syndrome learners (as such one does not exist), but to show the most effective ways to motivate to such learners to efficient and fun-providing work. In particular, we would like to bring the child closer to the learning process and, in this case, to the process of learning English. Taking up some kind of challenge in respect to this group of students, we have in mind that the term *Asperger's syndrome* has become very loud and fashionable over the years[iii]. Therefore, one can expect an increase in students with the diagnosed disorder, who should be expected to begin (and effectively continue) the whole process of school-based mandatory FL (English) education.

4. Motivation as an essential element in the learning processing

While raising the issue of motivation in respect to FL (English) education, children should first be taught on how to focus on what motivation is and how it is can be handled. The motivation itself can be defined as a kind of energy. It is therefore a kind of willingness to act, or even the will we need to produce in ourselves, so as to achieve the intended goal. At the moment, we feel motivated to do something, we are experiencing such energy in ourselves, that additionally is being focused on one specific action. However, as de Bono (1992) aptly remarks, motivation is not only the energy necessary to act but, above all, the choice that we have made, in which we want to do something consciously, we want to achieve a certain result.

"I want" is a key component of motivation. It must flow from ourselves and at the same time become our integral part. In no way is possible to impose, let alone to force someone to want. The only thing that can be done is to create the right conditions, or to produce some hopefully necessary factors that will enable and facilitate the other person to want to be more concerned about certain aspects, to be able to affect them and/or initiate the process in which the person's internal motivation can encourage the said action to go on.

One of the most effective ways is the motivation driven by curiosity, own interests or needs[iv]. When the learners see the connection between what they know, what they able to do and what the proposed offer is about, as well as whether they should engage their personal experience and in what context it should be important to them, they may come to the conclusion that the whole problem is really worth looking into. As it is important that a person learns effectively when the whole learning process is consistent with his or her internal program, attention should also be paid onto the element of concentration (mainly on the final effect of the learning process and the attitude of the students themselves). Thanks to the fact that children mostly do not

---

[iii] Retrieved from: http://niegrzecznedzieci.org.pl/asperger/specjalnie-dla-nauczycieli-i-terapeutow/zrozumiec-ucznia-z-zespolem-aspergera-wskazowki-dla-nauczycieli. [Accessed 15.01.2018]

[iv] Retrieved from: https://langzie.pl/blog/8-sposobow-motywowanie-uczniow-nauki-jezyka. [Accessed 15.03.2018 r.]

experience fear of new things, they tend to open up to the world and the new methods and techniques, which may be employed in the educational process.

Why are students with Asperger's syndrome often called "small professors"? Such children, when acting within the spheres of their interests, often select such surprising areas/ hobbies as space, ships, computer games and even sharks. However, the subject of these interests tends to be persistent and even obsessive. Therefore, they have a tendency to use professional vocabulary when discussing these phenomena; they ask questions relevant to their interests and/or provide relevant insights. While doing our research, we managed to find a student who revealed unusual interest in English and, to be more precise, English was an intermediary in relation to his main interest, which was programming. Being ten years old, the boy exceeded the language skills of many adults, his conversation being smooth and highly professionally proficient, what naturally aroused our great admiration. As it turned out, the boy has been diagnosed to have the Asperger's syndrome. During our conversation with the boy's English teacher, that mostly circulated around her professional involvement with this student, she emphasized that he expressed an above-average interest in English, at the same time revealing certain unusual problem; while having more knowledge than many adults and being happy to communicate in this language, the boy, at the same time, did not show any concern with his possible mistakes, which quite often occur even in adults learning English. The problem we signaled above occurs when the subject of the lesson is not related to the interests of the boy; it is in such situations then that the teacher herself must skillfully encourage him to participate in classes. As we were told, one of the possible ways to encourage him was a reward in the form of further classes on the subject of the boy's interests and a possibility of conducting subject-related lessons. In this way the boy, professionally helped by the teacher, had a unique opportunity to "talk about" the topic that interests him before other students.

5. How to motivate a child with Asperger's syndrome to learn English?

In the case Asperger's syndrome has been diagnosed in a child, from the beginning attention should be paid on learning. In the first years of the child's life, the parents mostly focus on caring activities, but a good way to encourage such a child to learn by the parent is to help them learn English through play. A very important aspect is the use of everyday personal contact with the language, awakening their curiosity, interest through creativity and diversity. From day to day, the child's knowledge should be gradually increased and the knowledge that English language skills will become necessary for them over time will become necessary for them[v]. It is also important to apply an appropriate reward system to such children from the very beginning, as this will allow a parent-teacher to both praise, rebuke and encourage them to later possible contacts with the peers who speak highly advanced English in different situations.

---

[v] Retrieved from: https://autyzmwszkole.com/2016/03/03/charakterystyka-zachowan-i-potrzeb-ucznia-z-zespolem-aspergera [Accessed 17.01.2018]

Many teachers keep looking for and/or trying to introduce various incentive systems into their educational processes. One of them can be the token system, or token economy, which will be referred to later in this paper, seems to be one of the types of effective learning methods. It is considered a useful technique in the, generally approached, reward system for proper behavior and drawing consequences for breaking previously established rules and/or principles. Following the opinions produced by Kolakowski, Wolańczyk & Pisula (2007) in their very interesting book, this system is a method with far less level of aversion, which means that we do not use unpleasant stimuli during the undertaken and performed activities. It can be introduced as early as the pre-school age and continued in further education (even in adult life). Initially used to activate chronically ill patients, the technique that is now commonly applied for marketing purposes. How can it be offered to children with Asperger's syndrome then? First of all, it has to be observed that quite a number of education-valued activation techniques that are currently at work with Asperger's syndrome diagnosed children are also used when working with so-called "difficult" children; as such techniques are largely based on various behavioral techniques, so the desired effect (in this case, education) is usually rewarded in a way attractive enough for the child.

6. Types of the token system

If we give the child a task that seemingly makes its performance difficult (or the child seems to be reluctantly predetermined because the activity may not be attractive enough for him/her), and we want to find a proposition in which we ourselves can be more effective, a good way to achieve success is the application of the so-called token system. The system is recognized as one of the most effective techniques that help in learning desirable behavior and/or extinguishing inappropriate forms of conduct. It involves awarding specific points for previously determined forms of behavior, collecting them and, as a result, exchanging for specific rewards. Its effectiveness stems from precisely defined rules and description of the expected behavior of the child. This means that we introduce prizes in the form of tokens in a way that is predictable way on the one hand, but also dependent on the child's behavior on the other[vi]. It is important, however, that the children have to be present, when the token system rules are being created.

Below are the three most popular - out of many other - types of the token system that can help one work with Asperger's syndrome learners[vii]:

[vi] Retrieved from: http://mamadu.pl/129133,tablice-motywacyjne-jak-stosowac-zeby-dzialaly. [Accessed: 17.01.2018]

[vii] Retrieved from: https://zdrowyprzedszkolak.pl/wychowanie/878/system-zetonowy-sposob-na-trudne-zachowanie-dziecka.html. [Accesssed: 17.01.2018]

- Classic token system - the main goal of this system is to increase the frequency of behaviors approved and desired by the teacher, which at the very beginning appear relatively rarely or are missing;
- Tournament of smiling faces - the aim of this system is to "extinguish" undesirable and negative behaviors, which appear relatively often, but we do not want (plan) to draw any consequences;
- Inverted token system - the goal is to enable a learner to rehabilitate themselves - that is, to work off the negative behavior that took place in the initial phase, thanks to, for example, additional tasks or duties.

When using a selected type of the token system, it is very important to give the appropriate numerical (point) value to specific behaviors. Therefore, as Święcicka (2016) observes, one should try to appreciate the positive manifestations of the learner and reflect them through points. An important factor is to determine the frequency of these behaviors so that the learner does not report on the lesson, every minute to obtain an additional point. The next thing is to determine the catalog of prizes, preferably in consultation with both the learner's parents and with him/her. Obviously, this system can be changed and/or modified in dependence on the upcoming needs.

Currently, one can also make use of the so-called 'incentive tables' based on the token system, which can also be used when teaching foreign languages (or expecting to make stable any other forms of everyday household duties such as: brushing teeth, dressing yourself, or cleaning toys) to small children. Depending on the age of the child, a teacher has to put on the motivation board a laminated inscription, or an image that refers to the form of behavior we are expecting from a learner to produce.

7. Work with a learner with Asperger's syndrome in English classes

Sometimes students with Asperger's syndrome are called specialists in their field, if the subject or issue remains in the narrow repertoire of their interests. They can use very sophisticated vocabulary, not known to other users of the language (the teacher included); quite often, they also make accurate and wise comments. Below, partly following Delaney (2009), we would like to present some tips that may help one avoid the chaos and unnecessary stress when working with a student with Asperger's syndrome:

- One can plan one's lessons and present a lesson plan so that the student can get used to it, remembering that - importantly - the child with Asperger's syndrome does not tolerate sudden changes in reality and feels bad in new, sudden and quickly imposed conditions;
- Starting the process of teaching English to a student with Asperger's syndrome one should use a simple language and make an effort to explain the statement accurately; portable (metaphorical) names, e.g. *you eat letters*, *you grow as on yeast*, etc. sound very irrational and do not seem to be very understandable to such

students. Learners with such a psychical condition are, above all, realists, so it is important for them to be "here" and "now";

- It's worth to turn off all the "diffusers", that might hamper the process of education in a way. It should be remembered to establish clear and understandable rules in the group with which the language teacher works (e.g. what forms of behavior will be rewarded and praised, and what ones will be recognized as wrong and not approved by the teacher);

- An important aspect is also to carry out observation of the learner during the lessons; if possible, it is good to capture what interested him/her while learning English and encourage him/her to express his/her observations. Efforts should also be made to develop a model for dealing with a child with Asperger's syndrome, that may be applied in the situations difficult for the learner, for example;

- When introducing new vocabulary, one should try to present an explanatory story (or explanatory images). It is best to use simple but precise terms, making sure that the learner understands them. In addition, it is important to try to choose the material where possible so that it will be related to the learner's interests.

It is true that the sooner one starts learning English, the faster and longer lasting effects can be met; there are, in fact, no doubts about it. However, it is definitely a bigger problem to instill this knowledge to children. It seems it is best to start from the beginning making the children interested in pictures, stories, asking them to repeat the words, listen to first readings in English, keep lettering or counting with them.

In children with Asperger's syndrome, however, such works should be much more illustrated. In order to be able to focus the learners' attention on learning, first of all, it is important to present the educational activities to them as fun; many colors, smaller or larger letters, a variety of pictures best capture their attention. It is important, however, that all these activities should not be exaggerated so as not to let the learner feel fed up with what they have been expected to do. These children do not have divisible attention and do not always correctly grasp the information that the adult wants to put emphasis on.

Out of the many language teaching/learning methods that can be used when presenting practical English to Asperger's syndrome diagnosed learners, the following ones appear to be useful:

- TPR (Total Physical Response); this method is based on simple, basic commands issued by the teacher. Any individual command is additionally supported by the body movement, and/or facial expression, so as to help the child remember the given command;

- CLT (Communicative Language Teaching); this is a method focusing on the active use of a foreign language. The primary goal is to achieve not so much the grammatical skills of the sentences constructed, but the ability to effectively communicate in a given situation;

- ALM (Audio-Lingual Method – audio-ling method); this method aims to instill appropriate habits by systematically repeating, memorizing and preserving the memorized material;
- An effective method of learning spelling is flashcards; they can be used from an early age, and over time, when the child will be able to read alone. Definitely, instead of the pictures, when the learners have learnt how to read, one can put flashcards with the subtitles only.

It is interesting how quickly children can remember nursery rhymes and poems. This skill must be used in contact with English. E. de Bono (1992) suggests that teaching the correct language can be made possible by listening to the poem; subsequently, its content should be systematically repeated with the child.

Considering that the child loves singing regardless of whether s/he has musical talent or not, one should take pains to take advantage of this potential, and at the same time not to discourage the child from singing; this may be obtained by letting go of English songs regularly and either engaging the same parent (to follow such procedures at home) and showing one's own initiative against the technique presented above.

Due to the large screen, and the appearance of colorful pictures, television is considered an entertainment form for both adults and children. Children mostly love watching movies or fairy tales for hours. Even if the child initially has a problem with understanding the message, provided to them in the foreign language, it is possible to regularly play them a Polish fairy tale, to be instantly followed by an English one. At the moment when we care about the development of the English language of a more cognitively developed child, we can include films, or cartoons with both a mother tongue/target language interpreter and/or Polish/English subtitles. Such a procedure should speed up the achievement of the set goal, enrich the vocabulary, but also pay attention to spelling. It is worth noting that this form of learning appears to be effective not only for children, but also for adults.

One of the most practical communication tools has been recognized to be an activity resulting in producing/placing messages in a foreign language. When such messages are directed towards the child, the simplest of them let the learners quickly acquire new vocabulary. In the teaching process, more attention should be paid to the correct accent of the phrases expressed and, if necessary, on the repeatability of the words and statements. In this matter, it is worth to use various electronic books, recordings or online translations. Additionally, the important role of the parent has to be observed; as the child usually draws attention to whether the parent also engages in the same educational play, or wishes to learn something equally strong, children most often take an example of the pattern found in their parents. At the same time, it has to be said that the position of the language teacher will turn out to be largely elevated in the later years of young learner language education, even in respect to Asperger's syndrome learners.

8. A few notes at the end

While making a conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that motivation appears to be the essential factor granting the success of any planned and/or initiated activity. Although everyone knows that, they also (mostly subconsciously) feel that it is usually quite difficult to get, maintain and use its accumulated potential. However once it has been stored, the trick is to do it in such a skillful way as to get the most out of this learning. Language education, without which it would be difficult to achieve any whatsoever further successes, largely develops a learner, their social as well as individual skills.

This is where would like to point out that the knowledge of English is a key issue for the young generation. For many school children English often remains one of the most important (if not the most important) subject in school; for quite a large number of them it falls within the category valid subjects. Knowing English makes one definitely more open to the world, it even allows one to improve their self-esteem. Young people often use their knowledge of the language by watching movies (both alone or with their English tutors), listening to the music, making an attempt to translate and understand the lyrics of songs, allowing them to use audiobooks (and/or other teaching aids) so that in the future they could be able to skillfully interact with various people from other corners of the world. There is no reason to keep Asperger-syndrome diagnosed children out of such glorious plans.

References

1. http://mamadu.pl/129133,tablice-motywacyjne-jak-stosowac-zeby-dzialały [Accessed. 17.01.2018]
2. http://niegrzecznedzieci.org.pl/asperger/specjalnie-dla-nauczycieli-i-terapeutow/zrozumiec-ucznia-z-zespolem-aspergera-wskazowki-dla-nauczycieli. [Accessed. 15.01.2018]
3. https://langzie.pl/blog/8-sposobow-motywowanie-uczniow-nauki-jezyka. [Accessed: 15.03.2018]
4. http://www.edukowisko.pl/?p=853. [Accessed 17.01.2018]
5. https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/nauka/1648088,1,najskuteczniejsze-sposoby-zeby-zachecic-dzieci-do-nauki-angielskiego.read.[Accessed 19.01.2018]
6. https://autyzmwszkole.com/2016/03/03/charakterystyka-zachowan-i-potrzeb-ucznia-z-zespolem-aspergera [Accessed: 17.01.2018]
7. https://zdrowyprzedszkolak.pl/wychowanie/878/system-zetonowy-sposob-na-trudne-zachowanie-dziecka.html. [Accessed: 17.01.2018]
8. Cytowska B., Winczura B., Stawarski A. (2013)., *Dzieci chore, niepełnosprawne i z utrudnieniami w rozwoju*. Wyd. II, „Impuls", Kraków.
9. Delaney T., (2009). *101 Games and Activities for Children with Autism, Asperger's and Sensory Processing Disorders*, McGraw-Hill Education, New York;
10. De Bono, E. (1992). *Teach your child how to think*. Penguin Group, New York;

11. Kołakowski A., Wolańczyk T., Pisula A., (2007) *ADHD – zespół nadpobudliwości psychoruchowej. Przewodnik dla rodziców i wychowawców*. Wyd. Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk,.

12. Silberman S., (2015). *NeuroTribes – The legacy of autism and the future of neurodiversity.* Avery: New York.

13. Święcicka J., (2016). *Uczeń z zespołem Aspergera. Praktyczne wskazówki dla nauczycieli*. Wyd. „Impuls", Kraków.