

**M U N I**  
**P E D**

# **Accommodating neurodivergent pupils in English as a foreign language classes: What are Czech teachers' needs?**

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# Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) rates statistics

- ASD rates statistics: rising worldwide
- Czech Republic (with a population of 10,5 million): the prevalence of autism is estimated between 1.5 and 2% (Nautis, 2023)
- more commonly diagnosed in boys than girls (ratio 4:1)
- In the school year 2021/2022: 4,214 pupils were diagnosed with ASD in the Czech Republic (ÚIV MŠMT ČR)

# ASD characteristics + terminology

- persistent impairments in social interaction, restricted repetitive patterns of behaviours, and interests or activities → difficulties in **social interaction, communication, and participation in daily activities** (Maenner, Warren, Williams et al., 2023; APA, 2022)
- standardized criteria to help diagnose ASD: the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-V-TR), published by the American Psychiatric Association in 2022 (APA, 2022)
- all the ASD research participants were diagnosed with **Asperger's syndrome** in line with DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) – not aware of the changes

# Research aims

- to investigate the challenges ASD pupils face when participating in English language classes at lower- and upper-secondary schools in the Czech Republic and how they influence classroom practices
- partial research findings: the teachers' perspectives on teaching their ASD pupils
- *It is the subtlety of understanding that teachers cannot be expected to possess without detailed training in autism, and it is the lack of this training that will do most to ensure the failure.*  
(Barnard et al., 2002, p. 20)
- Do the teachers have the recommended training?

# Research questions

- 1) What ASD characteristics and/or obstacles that prevent ASD pupils from learning English effectively are the most frequently reported by teachers?
- 2) How well-prepared and supported do teachers feel when teaching ASD pupils?
- 3) How much extra time do teachers spend preparing for an EFL lesson with an ASD pupil?

# Research Sample

- ASD pupils (n=10): lower- and upper-secondary school ASD pupils and two university ASD students starting their studies (four identified as female, six male, 12 – 21 years old)
- their parents (n=10)
- teachers (n=10)
- ASD adults (n=10)
- interviews + surveys

| ASD learners of English | Pupils and students |   |   |   |   |          |   |   |   |   | Adults |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---|---|---|---|----------|---|---|---|---|--------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|                         | A                   | B | C | D | E | F        | G | H | I | J | K      | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T |
| ASD learners' parents   | A                   | B | C | D | E | F1<br>F2 | G | - | I | J | -      | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| ASD learners' teachers  | A                   | B | C | - | E | F        | G | H | I | J | K      | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |

# Research Sample

- teachers (n=10, one identified as male, nine as female)
- five lower-secondary school teachers, three upper-secondary school teachers, one teacher working both at a lower- and upper-secondary school and one teacher working at both an upper- and postsecondary school
- three (30-40), four (40-50), two (50-60)
- years of teaching experience (ranging from one year to up to thirty-five years)
- Qualification: seven teachers: fully qualified teachers of English as an FL, Teacher J: a bachelor's degree in ELT, Teacher A: M.A. In business administration and psychotherapy for children, Teacher C in upper-secondary school teacher training specialising in Czech language and literature

# Research Sample

| Teacher | Male (M)/ female (F) | Age category | M.A. degree/ M.A. degree in ELT             | Years of teaching experience     | Full-time (F)/ part-time (P) | Type of school (current)                                  | ASD learner: year of birth/ age/ male (M)/ female (F)/ type of school | Survey (S)/ Interview (I) + length of interview in minutes |
|---------|----------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------------|------------------------------|---|---|--|
| A       | F                    | 40-49        | yes/no                                      | 19                               | F                            | lower-secondary (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)                   | 2005/14/F/ lower-secondary (7 <sup>th</sup> grade)                    | I (62 min)   |
| B       | F                    | 40-49        | yes/yes                                     | 15                               | F                            | lower-secondary (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)                   | 2005/15/M/ lower-secondary (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)                    | S  |
| C       | F                    | 30-39        | yes/no                                      | 1                                | F                            | lower-secondary (6 <sup>th</sup> grade)                   | 2007/12/M/ lower-secondary (7 <sup>th</sup> grade)                    | I (33 min)   |
| E       | F                    | 40-49        | yes/yes                                     | 21                               | F                            | secondary and post-secondary school for librarians        | 2000/20/M/ upper-secondary school/ university (1 <sup>st</sup> year)  | I (44 min)   |
| F       | M                    | 30-39        | yes/yes                                     | 5                                | P                            | lower-secondary 6 <sup>th</sup> – 9 <sup>th</sup> grade)  | 2004/16/M/ upper-secondary school (1 <sup>st</sup> year)              | I (114 min)  |
| G       | F                    | 50-59        | yes/yes                                     | 13                               | F                            | lower-secondary (6 <sup>th</sup> – 9 <sup>th</sup> grade) | 1999/21/M/ university (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)                          | S  |
| H       | F                    | 30-39        | yes/yes                                     | 16 (1 at upper-secondary school) | F                            | lower-secondary (6 <sup>th</sup> – 9 <sup>th</sup> grade) | 2003/17/F/ upper-secondary (2 <sup>nd</sup> year)                     | I (48 min)   |
| I       | F                    | 30-39        | yes/in progress                             | 13                               | F                            | lower-secondary (6 <sup>th</sup> – 9 <sup>th</sup> grade) | 2005/15/F/ lower-secondary (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)                    | I (51 min)   |
| J       | F                    | 40-49        | no (only B.A. degree)/no (only B.A. degree) | 4                                | F                            | lower-secondary (6 <sup>th</sup> – 9 <sup>th</sup> grade) | 2007/13/M/ lower-secondary (6 <sup>th</sup> grade)                    | I (48 min)   |
| K       | F                    | 50-59        | yes/yes                                     | 35                               | F                            | lower-secondary + upper-secondary                         | 1999/21/F/ university (1 <sup>st</sup> year)                          | S  |



# Methods of data collection and analysis

- qualitative research methods
- data source and method triangulation (Patton, 1999; Denzin, 2006, 2009, 2012)
- semi-structured interviews and qualitative surveys
- purposive sampling (Silverman, 2013): a combination of linear snowball sampling (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019) + Paspoint, APLA Prague, Nautis + social media platforms
- final sample: 26 interviews and 13 surveys (1<sup>st</sup> of April 2020 - 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2020) → transcription → thematic analysis (deductive + inductive)

# Findings: ASD characteristics and/or obstacles

- none of the teachers reported any learning difficulties or associated diagnoses in their pupils
- seven ASD pupils (out of ten) and/or their parents claimed the pupils had been diagnosed with either ADHD (Pupil C, Pupil I, Pupil J), dysgraphia (Pupil D) or multiple associated diagnoses – Student G (ADD, hypoactivity, dysgraphia), Pupil H (ADD, anxiety disorder, panic disorder), Adult K (bipolar disorder, OCD)
- Need for a teaching assistant (TA)? Only four teachers (Teachers B, E, F, and G): the social area (Pupil B, F, and Student G for breaks only), communication (Pupil B, Student E – only in her first year, Pupil F). No help needed: cognitive or sensorimotor area.

# Findings: *ASD characteristics and/or obstacles*

- 1) unwillingness to communicate/talk (A, F, H)
- 2) problems in verbal communication (A, B, F, H, I)
- 3) problems in non-verbal communication (A, E, F, H)
- 4) other problems in social interactions (A, B, C, E, F, H, I, J, K)
- 5) lack of imagination (no teachers)
- 6) sensitivity to auditory sensations and perceptions (A, C, F, K, I – yes, but not in English classes)
- 7) sensitivity to visual and spatial sensations and perceptions (none, Teacher A not sure)
- 8) sensitivity to olfactory sensations and perceptions (B, Teacher A not sure)
- 9) sensitivity to haptic and kinaesthetic sensations and perceptions (Teacher A not sure)
- 10) rude/inappropriate behaviour (disturbance) of the classmates (I)

# Findings: *ASD characteristics and/or obstacles*

- 11) their inappropriate behaviour (I)
- 12) reduced ability to concentrate (C, H)
- 13) disinterest in learning English (J, Teacher A not sure; F and H – in the past but not anymore)
- 14) associated diagnoses and/or learning difficulties /e.g. dyslexia, ADHD/ (no teachers)
- 15) anxiety (A, E, F, H, I, J, K)
- 16) problems with transitions between activities (C, F)
- 17) problems starting or stopping an activity (A, C, F)
- 18) the pace of the lesson mostly too slow (C, I)
- 19) the pace of the lesson mostly too fast (A, F)
- 20) reduced intellectual ability (Teacher A reluctant to judge)

# Findings: *ASD characteristics and/or obstacles*

- 21) meltdowns (F, H, I)
- 22) shutdowns (no teachers)
- 23) other (B: does not like specific songs and types of games)

# **Findings: *How well-prepared and supported do teachers feel when teaching ASD pupils?***

- 1) four teachers (C, H, J and K) felt unprepared; stress
- 2) five teachers (A, E, F, G, and I) who felt prepared to teach ASD learners because of their teaching experience but lacked theoretical background in the topic of ASD
- 3) one teacher (B) who felt prepared theoretically but lacked enough experience in the field

## Interview C/3 with ASD Pupil C's teacher of English

*I was terrified, to tell you the truth, when I saw the diagnosis he [Pupil C] had (...) and when I saw that, I felt completely helpless, [um], like I really had no idea what I was going to do with this person in that classroom (...). The situation is really unenviable for the teacher, especially me, when I started my first year of teaching and suddenly, I had some kind of a diagnosis like that in my classroom. I almost couldn't sleep at night, but in the end the reality was different, really. I was looking for which pupil he actually was, which boy it was, with the Asperger's, because there was no one showing any signs of any specific behaviour or specific needs, so it was absolutely fine in the end (...). But the shock was really there, at first. The fear of how I was going to cope and what it would entail. I had no information, from anyone. I was scared – what else should I tell you –.*

# **Findings: *How much extra time do teachers spend preparing for an ELF lesson with an ASD pupil?***

- 1) four teachers (Teacher C, F, G, K) – no extra time
- 2) six teachers: little extra time (15 minutes a week up to 15 minutes for each lesson – one teacher only)



# Conclusion

- TA in English classes not always needed (in four out of ten cases), or not needed full-time (two out of the four cases)
- no extra substantial time for lesson preparation (in nine out of ten cases)
- The teachers often claim to rely on their experience in their interactions with and lesson planning for ASD learners.
- more support from the school management welcomed (Teacher B, F) + Special Education Centers, and the pupils' parents (Teacher E)
- specialized teacher training for EFL teachers welcomed (A, C, E, F, G, I)

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