

# Facilitating ESL Students with Autism Learn Sight Vocabulary: Teachers' Practices and Voices

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## Abstract

Teachers' support is critical to the learning of special needs students. Without teachers' assistance and understanding, it may be difficult for such students to develop learning. The paper reports the findings of a study that looked into English language teachers' practices in facilitating primary school ESL students with autism learn sight vocabulary. Observational field notes, interviews, and document analysis indicate that the teachers used a variety of ways to help the students learn. The findings indicate humanistic language teaching practices. The practices seem to be important in promoting sight vocabulary development among the students. The findings have important implications for teacher educators, in service and pre service teachers involved in teaching ESL students with autism in inclusive and special education settings.

**Keywords:** ESL; autism; sight vocabulary; teachers' practices

## 1. Overview of the study

In Malaysia, students with autism are increasingly enrolled in schools by their parents. With more students with autism enrolling in schools, there is also the concern that teachers must have the knowledge and skills to help these children to learn. However, this expectation may probably be beyond the capacity of the majority of primary school teachers as they have not been specifically trained to teach students with autism [1,2,3]. Lack of knowledge about effective methods and limited awareness about autism may influence the teachers' practices. If the students' educational needs are not met, they may lag behind their typically developing peers. Thus, it is important to explore teachers' practices in the classroom settings to identify the experiences and challenges in the Malaysian context. Research on how teachers facilitate sight vocabulary learning of students with autism may be a practical move to help them gain literacy. With such research, one can identify the practices that teachers use and the functions the practices serve in facilitating the learning of such students.

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## **2. Literature review.**

### *2.1. Teachers' facilitation*

Teachers' facilitation is important in order to make learning experiences meaningful to students. Teachers' facilitation or scaffolding, as termed by [4], is a fundamental concept in social constructivism. Over the course of a teaching session, the teacher adjusts the amount of support and guidance that the students need in order to accomplish a task. Seen in this manner, learning takes place because of the scaffolding of others. The assistance provided by the teacher would enable the students to do more until they can take charge of their own learning. Assistance can take the form of adjusted teachers' practices to suit the students' learning needs and modifications of students' academic task. Often, for students with autism, scaffolding takes the form of modeled behaviour by the teachers, teachers simplifying the task into manageable units, and teachers motivating the student to complete the task on his or her own.

### *2.2. Learning challenges faced by students with autism*

Autism is a neurological disorder and marked by social, communication and language deficits [5]. The characteristics of children with autism may differ from one another as autism is a spectrum. Some children with autism exhibit self-stimulatory behaviours, such as staring at rotating objects, as well as repetitive body movements, such as rocking, spinning, and flapping their hands in front of their face [6]. In some cases, children with autism may display self-injurious behaviours [7]. Research has identified that some children classified with autism have superior skills in certain areas such as in the areas of memory, mechanical ability, music, or calculation. Despite the impairments, a child with autism has the ability to learn. This can be achieved through a combination of teaching strategies. The most effective teaching strategies should be highly structured to emphasize clarity and order [8]. These include teacher directed learning, the use of scaffolding, repetition of tasks and the presentation of information in small chunks to help students grasp newly taught skills [9]. In most cases, these children benefit from structured teaching.

Besides structured teaching, another strategy that could bring clarity to a child with autism is the use of visual cues. Studies have found that children with autism attend to visual cues in order to learn and communicate their needs [10]. Students with autism showed greater ability in attending and processing visual stimuli than auditory stimuli [4]. Therefore, visual-spatial language that is represented by print and visual supports could be beneficial for the teaching and learning of children with autism. Apart from having visual strengths, children with autism have been found to respond to direct instruction and discrete trial teaching format [11]. These instructions are among the useful behavioural techniques in teaching language skills for this population.

Research has shown that no matter where the students with autism fall on the spectrum, they usually have good decoding skills. Children with autism can decode words by relying on similar phonological and orthographic mapping processes as typically developing children [12]. However, their comprehension of the words is impaired. Unlike typically developing children, the ability to construct meaning does not develop along with word recognition skills [13]. Children with autism may be skilled at decoding but have difficulty comprehending what they read. Typical children construct meaning by making inferences, but not children with autism, as they seem unable to make contextual inferences about thoughts [14]. Failure to understand inferences in texts imply that these children have limited ability to understanding intentions or mental states of others. However, research indicates that these children benefit from rereading to reconstruct their understanding of the text [15].

## **3. Method**

This qualitative study looked into the process of teaching and learning sight vocabulary in its natural context. Four ESL teachers who taught students with autism in inclusive settings participated in the study. The teachers had more than four years of experience teaching English language and they had at least one year of experience teaching students with autism. The teachers and students were observed for fifteen times for six months. The interview was carried out before the school break started.

Data consisted of observational field notes, interviews, and documents. The different methods of data collection were used (i.e. classroom observations of sight vocabulary instructions, interviews, and document analysis) for validating data and findings through triangulation. Triangulation was carried out to ensure trustworthiness of data [16].

The research question of the study was: How do teachers' facilitation promote sight vocabulary learning among ESL students with autism?

#### **4. Findings and discussions**

The qualitative data revealed themes that recurred across the four teacher participants. There were other identified themes than the ones presented below. In this paper, the themes that were presented and discussed in were the most recurring and salient.

##### *Prompting with examples*

The teachers were noted to prompt the student participants in various situations. Prompting was used when the teachers found that the student participants had difficulty thinking of the correct answer.

Mr. Elham: Teacher puts up his hand and says, "Ok..these are flowering plants. What are the non-flowering plants?" He asks the student to look at the pictures of non-flowering plants in the textbook. Then, he describes a plant: "*Yang ni, ada duri*(This one has thorns)...what is it?" (OBS4Mr Elham:21.7.2011)

Mr. Mehad:Teacher reads out question number 4 – When is English week? Teacher goes on asking, "When is National Day?" Students reply, "In August." Teacher asks, "Number 6? When is Children's Day?" Teacher prompts, "It is in..?" Teacher points to the calendar. (OBS10Mr Mehad:14.9.2011)

Puan Yona: Teacher calls on Aida. Aida says, "A few caps." Teacher repeats the word caps and asks Aida to repeat after her. Aida stumbles on a few words. Teacher goes to Aida's place and prompts her by showing her the picture of caps. Aida reads with assistance from the teacher. (OBS12Puan Yona:9.8.2011)

Puan Azra:Teacher shows a picture of students putting up their hands. Teacher prompts, "Please put?" Danyal says, "Put up." Teacher corrects him, "Please put up your hands." (OBS7Puan Azra:15.8.2011).

It was noted that when the teachers gave verbal prompts that were supported with examples, students work showed positive outcome. This indicates that students with autism need instructions that are supported with concrete stimuli. Since students with autism have difficulty understanding verbal commands, teachers need to provide concrete support together with verbal prompting. This is congruent with previous studies that indicated students with autism rely on visuals to understand the world around them [10][17]. It appeared that verbal prompts that were supported with concrete examples such as pictures or printed word eased the students' understanding of the language input.

##### *Using L1 to translate meaning of words*

Using L1 to translate meaning of words is the use of concurrent translation from L1 to L2. All the teachers used L1 to translate meaning of target words. Examples from observational field notes were as follows.

Mr. Elham: Teacher translates the sentence: A grasshopper has six legs to L1, "*Belalang...ada enam kaki*." (OBS6Mr Elham:5.8.2011).

Mr. Mehad:Teacher explains the meaning of 'hard shell'. Teacher explains further in L1, "*Kulit keras...cengkerang keras*." (OBS3Mr Mehad:27.6.2011).

Puan Yona: Teacher asks the students to colour the objects that she is going to draw. She draws some objects on the whiteboard and labels the objects. Teacher uses L1 to translate the meaning of the words she had written on the whiteboard. She says, "Socks...*stokin*, stick..*kayu*, cot..*katil bayi*." (OBS11Puan Yona:5.8.2011).

Puan Azra:Teacher shows another picture. It is a picture of a girl watering a rose plant. Teacher asks Danyal, "What is the person doing?" Another student, Airul says, "*Siram*." Teacher asks, "*Siram tu apa?*" Teacher waits for Danyal to answer then she provides the answer, "Water....water *tu siram*." (OBS15Puan Azra:26.9.2011).

The findings of the present study indicate that the student participants could use their knowledge of L1 to understand the meaning of L2 words. The student participants in the study were noted to have considerable knowledge of the L1, therefore it was practical for the teachers to link L2 words to their background knowledge of L1 [18]. Furthermore, the students in the present study were verbal and they were observed to be able to verbalize their thoughts in both languages. Therefore, it is appropriate for the teachers to capitalize on the students' bilingual knowledge to get them to understand the meaning of L2 words.

The findings could perhaps be explained through previous findings of the use of L1 (Spanish) in bridging L2 (English) instruction [19] [20]. The researchers found that L1 could help students with low proficiency level to learn words in L2 efficiently. In the context of the study, the use of L1 provides the means through which the students make connections with the newly taught L2 words.

#### *Using L1 to explain word concept*

The teachers were observed to use L1 to explain word concepts. The examples from observational data illustrate the practice for each teacher.

Mr. Elham:Teacher looked around and waited for some response from the students.Then, he describes a plant: "*Yang ni, ada duri...what is it?*" (OBS4Mr Elham 21.7.2011)

Mr. Mehad:Teacher moves on to the month of November. Mr.Mehad associates the events that mark the month of November. He explains in L1 to the class of the activities during a school concert, "*Main muzik, main piano, buat persembahan*." (OBS11Mr Mehad:20.9.2011).

Puan Azra: Teacher reviews last week's lesson on the use of singular and plural. Then, she explains to the students that if the object were one, the phrase would be one ruler. If there are two rulers, then, it becomes two rulers. Teacher asks students to check their work last Monday. Teacher asks for verification in L1, "*Sebab apa tak ada 's'?*" Teacher waits for students to respond. Then, she continues explaining in L1, "*Sebab dia (the object) one...satu*." (OBS3Puan Azra: 20.6.2011).

The findings of the study could be explained through Cummins' model of dual language learning where word learning in L2 is facilitated by L1 knowledge [21]. The students in the study may have used their conceptual understanding of words learnt in L1 as a knowledge base to facilitate L2 acquisition. Cummins proposes that a bilingual student would be expected to apply his or her conceptual understanding of L1 when learning words in L2. In the present study, the conceptual information about the words may not be relearned in English, but recoded using the students' existing knowledge of their mother tongue: Malay.

#### *Using L1 to explain grammar rules*

Grammar rules were explained in L1 to increase students' comprehension. The teacher participants in the study used L1 to explain grammar rules. Similarly, each teacher taught grammar rule by translating the meaning of the target word to L1. Next, they explained the rules in L1. Then, the teachers gave an example of how the word was used in a sentence.

Mr. Elham: Teacher explains to students in L1 that the word 'has' is used when describing something: He says, "Has ...*kitagunauntukterangkan apa yang orang tu ada.*" Then, he gives more examples, "A bee has wings." (OBS6Mr Elham:5.8.2011).

('has' means to possess)

Mr. Mehad: Teacher reads the first question – Where did Nishago? Teacher writes the question on the blackboard. Students answer, "Nisha go to the zoo." Teacher says, "No.. not 'go'. Past tense of 'go' is went..*telahpergi.* Nisha went to the zoo." Teacher explains further the meaning of 'went' using L1. (OBS5Mr. Mehad:30.6.2011).

Puan Azra:Teacher reviews last week's lesson on the use of singular and plural.Then, she explains to the students that if the object were one, the phrase would be one ruler. If there are two rulers, then, it becomes two rulers. Teacher asks students to check their work last Monday. Teacher asks for verification in L1, "*Sebab apa tak ada 's'?*" Teacher waits for students to respond. Then, she continues explaining in L1, "*Sebab dia ialah'one'...satu.*" (OBS3Puan Azra:20.6.2011).

(Why is there no 's'?). (Because the object is one).

The explanation given in L1 may facilitate students' word development [21]. The findings in the study indicate that there is a supportive relationship between Malay (L1) and English (L2) for word learning. What a student did not know in L2 might become clear when it was explained in detail in L1.By providing the explanation in a comprehensible way, the teachers provided the student participants with the help they needed in order to understand the grammar rules. The student participants could relate to the teachers' explanation as it was given in L1, a language that they can relate to in their attempts to understand the target language.

#### *Having high expectation*

Similarly, all the teachers showed that they have high expectations for the students. The teachers' practices were supported by their views of the students.

Mr Elham:Teacher wrote the next question on the blackboard.What day is tomorrow?A student volunteered. He put up his hand quickly. Teacher asked him to write the answer on the blackboard.The boy however, had the spelling for 'Saturday' wrong. He spelt 'Saturby' instead of 'Saturday.'Teacher asked Afy to correct the spelling.Afy came forward and wrote the word 'Saturday' correctly.

Mr. Mehad: Now, teacher asks Im to read. Im stood up and read. He looked a bit anxious. He faced the class and read. He did not seem to have problems reading the story. He only had the word beard wrongly pronounced. Im is moving his body slowly from left to right while reading. Teacher corrects Im's pronunciation of the word beard which he pronounced as bear. Teacher praises Im and asks him to sit down. (OBS1 Mr Mehad 26.5.2011).

Puan Yona:Next, teacher asks Aida to write the word Monday on the white board. Aida comes forward and she writes the word Monday correctly.

Puan Azra:Teacher explains the next task to Danyal. Then, teacher checks other students work. Teacher comes back to check Danyal's work. Teacher asks him, "Which direction is next?" Danyal says, "Right." Teacher praises him, "*Dah pandai.* (Excellent)." Danyal has completed his work. Teacher asks him whether it is a difficult task. Danyal says, "Susah (It's difficult)." Teacher consoles him, "*Tak apa, lama-lama pandai lah*(It's alright. You will knowhow to soon)." Teacher explains the task to other students and Danyal looks on.

In this study, the teachers' high expectation of the students' ability may have facilitated the students' learning in that they were willing to take risks and participate in the language activities. The teachers placed high expectations on the students with autism to perform as did their friends. The teachers supported their expectations by inviting them to participate in the language activities. The students with autism were engaged in similar activities as the other typical students. The teachers' high expectations reflect the elements of humanistic language teaching in that the students' affect was taken into account. Paying attention to feelings and emotional well-being of the students could

facilitate language learning [22]. In the present study, the need for affective teaching is necessary since the student participants have impairments that hold them back from getting involved in the language activities out of their own free will. A teacher's understanding and care are essential in making the students' success in learning vocabulary possible.

#### *Acknowledging students' effort*

Acknowledging student's effort is the act of praising and showing appreciation towards the student's ability to perform vocabulary task correctly. Teachers in the study were found to acknowledge the student participants for their effort. They did this openly and at the same time influenced the rest of the class to show support for the particular students.

Mr Elham:Teacher asks the class, "What do you do with a burger?" Students say, "Eat." Afy comes to the front and write in the blank the word 'eat.' Teacher praises Afy, "Good."Afy returns to his desk smiling (OBS15Mr Elham:14.10.2011).

Mr. Mehad: Teacher corrects Im's pronunciation of the word 'beard' which he pronounced as bear. Teacher praises Im after he has finished reading and asks him to sit down. (OBSMr Mehad:26.5. 2011).

Puan Yona: Aida reads the sentence incorrectly. Teacher walks to her and prompts her. Teacher points to each word as Aida read. Teacher praises Aida. Aida smiles and claps her hands. (OBS5Puan Yona: 30.6.2011).

Puan Azra:Teacher checks Danyal's work. Teacher says, "*Bagus lah...Macam ni lah.*" Teacher commends on Danyal's work. (OBS7Puan Azra:29.7.2011).

In the present study, the teachers' practice could perhaps influence the student participants to remember the lexical input better. The environment in which the student participants learn appears to promote learning as it is not threatening. There was no indication of teachers being hostile towards the students throughout the observations. This finding is congruent to the humanistic language teaching approach in that teachers are responsible for promoting learning through positive practices. The affective environment that the teachers created might have helped the student participants to have confidence in their own learning ability[22][23]. According to the humanistic approach [22], the child's self-concept is based on how he is perceived. In the present study, the relationship between the teachers and students plays an important role in developing the students' sight vocabulary learning. The teachers' positive regard for each student may have promoted a sense of security amongst the student participants.

#### *Inviting participation*

Inviting participation is an act of accepting the student as part of the classroom community. Teachers were found to invite the students' participation in the language activities.

Mr. Elham:Teacher asks Afy to read the next sentence of the story. Afy looks perplexed. Teacher comes to him and asks him to read. Afy stands up and reads the next line. (OBS1Mr Elham:15.4.2011)

Mr. Mehad: Now, teacher asks Im to read. Im stands up and reads. He looks a bit anxious. He turns to face the class and reads. He does not seem to have so much problem reading the story. He only has the word beard wrongly pronounced. (OBS1Mr Mehad: 26.5.2011)

Puan Yona: Teacher reads the story and Aida acts out accordingly. When teacher says, "Give the duck some water." Aida stands still and does not know what to do. Teacher points to the 'duck' and instructs Aida to pretend giving it some water. (OBS16Puan Yona 23.8.2011)

Puan Azra:Danyal stands up and touches his trousers. Danyal says, "This is a short." Teacher says that is not shorts. She asks him to choose another object. She wants Danyal to choose things in the classroom that they had just learnt. Danyal says, "This is a table." Then he sits down. (OBS3Puan Azra: 20.6.2011).

In the present study, inviting students to participate in the language activity could be a way of giving them the experience of interacting with words. The students were called on to read out a story as seen in the classrooms of Mr Elham and Mr Mehad. Puan Yona involved Aida in word learning activity by asking her to act out the sentence. Meanwhile, Puan Azra called on Danyal to get him to name the things in the classroom. The student participants in the study were included in the language activities frequently. The frequent participation may have positive outcome for the students as they were observed to be comfortable to take risks in learning language.

The teachers in the present study had shown that students with autism needed to be accepted in the classroom community. Although the students with autism were mostly passive, the teachers took the initiative to involve them in the language activities as their nondisabled peers. In a way, the teachers allowed the students with autism membership in the literacy community [22]. In this respect, the students in the study are given the same opportunity to experience learning as their nondisabled peers. This experience may be necessary in developing interest in learning a second language.

Including students with autism in the language activities has another positive effect. The other students in the classroom benefit from being taught how to accept students with autism. The teachers in the study had not only provided the students with autism language experience, but also good values for the rest of the typical students. Acceptance of others with disability is perhaps an important element that needs to be inculcated amongst typical students.

#### *Giving extra attention*

All the teacher participants in the present study were observed to give extra attention to the student participants. This practice could be observed across all the teacher participants' data. The teachers were noted to do the following:

Mr Elham:(FSVD/PMP/GEA) Teacher asks the class to check their answers. He goes through the answers with the class. Suddenly, Afy gets up and tugs at the teacher's sleeve. He has his thumb up and asks the teacher to touch his. Teacher looks surprised but he smiles and touches Afy's tumb. (OBS4Mr Elham: 21.7.2011).

Puan Yona: Teacher asks Aida to write the day and date. She stands up and happily writes the day and date on the whiteboard. Teacher waits for the students to write the date and day. Teacher tells the class that today she is going to ask them to write down the words that they have learnt. Teacher says: "Okay, now, number 1, write 'Good morning'. Aida sighs and says, "*Macam ni?*" Teacher stands near Aida and checks her spelling. (OBS13Puan Yona: 11.8.2011).

In this study, giving extra attention is probably helpful in ensuring learning takes place for the student participants. Evidence from data showed that the students needed more attention from the teachers. The elements that teachers used are in tandem with the humanistic language teaching where the focus is on creating an affective climate necessary for learning to occur [21,22]. It appears that affective element when added to cognitive aspects, facilitates language learning.

#### **Conclusion**

In sum, cross-case analysis reveals a variety of practices used by all the teacher participants to facilitate students' sight vocabulary development. Teachers were observed to use humanistic-based teaching practices namely, showing high expectation of the student's ability, giving extra attention, inviting participation, and acknowledging students' effort. Other practices included the use of L1, and prompting with examples. Teachers also promoted word development through immediate error correction. Themes that are worthy of note are that of the humanistic-based practices as these might help to foster a sense of belonging and personal empowerment in the student participants. The teachers accepted the students for whom they are. They tried to accommodate the students' learning needs where possible as evidenced from the field notes and review of the interviews.

What has emerged from this study indicated that humanistic practices in teaching students with autism is necessary as the students need empathy and close monitoring from the teachers. Teachers' empathy is critical since the students are beginning readers who have specific disorders. The findings indicate that teachers with positive and warm attitude shaped the classroom into an affective learning environment necessary for learning to take place. The teachers' positive outlook of the students' ability had led them to engage the students in the language activities necessary for experience and interaction with the words to occur. This may have supported the students emotionally. Having high expectation of the students' ability shaped the teachers' mindset of how much the students could achieve. This in return prompted the teachers to give the students the opportunities to demonstrate their comprehension in many ways. The ways were matching word to picture task, answering in L1 to indicate their understanding, acting out words and constructing words in their own sentences. The teachers' positive attitude helped to enhance the development of the students in the ways mentioned earlier, indicating that they did not judge their students as less capable. Without teachers' empathy and support, the students may not be able to acquire sight vocabulary effectively.

Although empathy and humanistic approaches are necessary in teaching sight vocabulary to students with autism, these elements are insufficient to meet the learning needs of ESL students with autism. The need for professional development for teachers teaching students with autism is necessary to help them plan and teach English language lessons effectively. Besides input on content knowledge, teachers need to be equipped with information on the students' with autism learning characteristics and challenges. Such information will be valuable to teachers as they need to adapt teaching instructions and materials to suit the learning needs of these students. Thus, it is suggested that teacher-training institutes re-evaluate their preparation programme to prepare both mainstream and special education teachers for teaching students with autism.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank the participants of the study for their support.

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