

# CHARACTERISTICS AND ENGLISH LEARNING APPROACHES FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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## ABSTRACT

*This research aims to investigate the characteristics and English learning approach for special need students, especially for autism students. This research used descriptive qualitative research design which focus on literature study from relevance references. The collected data were analyzed descriptively thus it could be seen the characteristics and English learning approach for autism students. The result of the study showed that the characteristics of autism students could be seen from their communication, social interaction, sensory disorders, play pattern, behavior, and emotional. The appropriate English learning approaches used for autism students were Differentiated Instruction as an Individual Based Learning Approach, Constructivism Learning Approach and the Whole Students Learning Approach. Differentiation learning required teachers who were experienced not only to understand and be able to identify students' needs but also they were skilled to be flexible with the curriculum and modify learning based on the students' needs. There were three methods could be followed by teachers in teaching and learning process, such as modify the content, apply the learning process, and designing the final product. Meanwhile, The effective implementation of constructivism approach for autism students were using various songs and games, involving students in solving problems, using some sources especially for students with special needs, and designing learning instruction. By implementing those strategies, it is expected the autism students could follow learning process like the ordinary students.*

Keywords: *Characteristics, English Learning Approach, Autism Spectrum Disorders*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education has an important role in our life. Everyone has an opportunity and the same right to get education. In order to achieve education goals, the use of language is necessary. According to Juliari and Yuniari (2019) language could be said as a mean of communication. It is a kind of symbols used to express our thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Through language, people interact and cooperate one to the other. In relation with this, vocabulary mastery plays an important role in language learning. By mastering vocabulary, a person would be proficient in the language (Puspitarini and Budiyanto, 2014).

English as a foreign language has been inserted in the education curriculum in Indonesia. The main objective of learning English as an international language for students is to master language competence which is an indicator of the success of a language learner. The competencies meant are in the fields of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that should be had by students related to the ability to use language (Ratminingsih, 2019).

Moreover, English is necessary taught for students since it becomes one subject that given to students at school including special needs students. According to Padmadewi, *et al* (2021) special needs students could be said as children who experience limitations or extraordinary physical, mental, intellectual, social and emotional influences significantly in their growth process compared to other children of their same age. Learning English for students with special needs, especially students with autism spectrum disorders do not emphasize that students

should mastering English, but English is taught as an effort to introduce vocabulary to students.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is one type of special needs students. Padmadewi and Artini (2017) stated that Autism students clearly require special attention and care. Autism is stated as having impairments in reciprocal social communication and social interaction, and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. Autism is a child who has communication interference, social interaction, and repetitive and stereotyped behavior patterns. In the other words, it could be said as developmental disorders that significantly affect verbal and non-verbal communication and social interactions that have a negative impact on children's education. Moreover, student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is less likely than his normal peers to initiate conversations, respond appropriately to the conversational turns and be able to understand the intention and the illocutionary force of utterances. He also shows poor understanding towards the emotional states of others and struggle in particular to use facial expressions to show his emotions (Cummings, 2014).

Autism students need to get special services in the educational system and they need additional support such as special schools and pedagogical methods, including suitable learning approach (Dhermawati *et al*, 2019). Besides that, teaching English for this type of students is challenging. In this case, the teacher should understand what the autism students need in the learning process. Teacher should implement appropriate approach, strategy or method to encourage students' desire and motivation to learn. Therefore, by implementing suitable English learning approach for autism students become the best way to achieve education goals.

## **2. RESEARCH METODOLOGY**

This study used descriptive qualitative research method. Descriptive qualitative method is concerned on the analysis of the relationships between non-manipulated variables and the development of generalizations (Riduwan, 2008). This study used literature study techniques from the relevance sources. The collected data were analyzed descriptive qualitatively, therefore it could be seen the characteristics and English learning approaches for special needs students, especially autistic students.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The Concept of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)***

According to Ali, et al (2019) Autism is a disorder of social development that affects the development of the brain, and hence the behavior of a person. Autism is a condition about someone who got it since birth or toddlerhood, which makes him unable to relate socially or communication normally. Autism is related to the nervous system, children who experience barriers to brain development, especially in the area of language, social and fantasy. Autistic children seem to have their own world without paying attention environment (Widiastuti, 2019). In addition, Autism is commonly found in the students who have problem in their social development and communication both verbally and non-verbally. Cummings (2014) in Padmadewi & Artini (2017) stated that ASD students clearly require special attention and care. The students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is less likely than his normal peers to initiate conversations, respond appropriately to the conversational turns and be able to understand the intention and the illocutionary force of utterances. He also shows poor understanding towards the emotional states of others and struggle in particular to use facial expressions to show his emotions.

### ***The Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)***

There are two general characteristics that can be seen of autism children are they stay away from people and avoid to physical contact. They are generally described as passive or agitated children. Passive children are those who are mostly silent and don't make much demands on their parents. Autism children often lag in terms of communication, social skills and cognition. Besides that, they have dysfunctional behaviors, such as repetitive activities and non – goal directed behavior (swinging the body without stopping, folding arms), self-harm, eating and sleeping problems, insensitivity to pain.

Nurfadhillah, et al (2021) stated perseverative behavior is one of the most common characteristics of autism children, a rigid will to do or be in the same state over and over again. If these children feel disturbed by their ritual behavior, they will get very angry (tantrums). Autistic students also have characteristics in the fields of communication, social interaction, sensory, play patterns, behavior and emotions as follows:

**a. Communication**

There are some characteristics of autism students in communicating to the others such as the students' language development is slow, students' appear to be deaf and have difficulty in speaking, sometimes used an appropriate words, babbling meaninglessly used language that cannot be understood by others, speech is not used as a means of communication, usually speak in non-verbal language, and pulling at other people's hand to do what they want.

**b. Social Interaction**

Autism students have low interest in socialize. They tend to be an individual and ignore with their environment, beside that they avoid to contact with other people and they are not interested in playing with their friends.

**c. Sensory disorders**

There are some characteristics of autism students that can be seen from sensory disorders, such as very sensitive to touch, cover the ears immediately if hearing a loud sound, insensitive to pain and fear.

**d. Play pattern**

As stated previously, autism students prefer to be individual and avoid contact with other people. They are not playing like students in general. They also do not like to play with students at the same age, they are not creative and imaginative. They likes to rotate the objects such as fans, bicycle and wheels. If they like a thing, they will bring it everywhere.

**e. Behavior**

There are some unusual behaviors that can be seen of the ASD students, such as they can behave excessively (hyperactivity) or deficiency (deficit), they like to sit and stare blankly. They are having overly focused interests, such as with moving objects or with parts of objects, being more sensitive or less sensitive than other people to sensory input, such as light, noise, clothing, or temperature.

**f. Emotional**

Autism students usually difficult to control their emotional. Sometimes they get angry for no reason if they do not get what they want. They like to disturb until attack someone that they do not like, harm their selves, and difficult to understand other people's feeling.

***Approaches for Autism Spectrum Disorders Students***

In teaching English for special needs students, especially students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), the teacher should understand the students' need and characteristics. By knowing their characteristics, it will help teacher in teaching and giving instruction for students. Giving a suitable approach in learning English is one of good way in teaching autism students. There are some approach that could be implemented in teaching ASD students, namely:

**Differentiated Instruction as an Individual Based Learning Approach**

According to Tomlinson (2005) in Subban (2006) defined that differentiated instruction as a philosophy of teaching that is based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences in their readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. The main objective of differentiated instruction is to take full advantage of every student's ability to learn.

The students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are special and the uniqueness requires explicit need for teachers to identify individualized approaches to help them achieve their academic goals. Individually, Autism students could be assisted and taught by using differentiation learning approach. Differentiated instruction is the instruction provided to students based on the different needs of the students in the same classroom. The use of differentiated instruction reaches its most effective treatment especially in dealing with all students in inclusive classroom. The benefit of the differentiated instruction is therefore being able to provide learning opportunities to all students within an inclusive classroom (Ford, 2013).

The implementation of differentiation learning requires teachers who are experienced not only to understand and be able to identify students' needs but also they are skilled to be flexible with the curriculum and modify learning based on students' needs. In this case, teachers need to have a good understanding the characteristics of students in the classroom. This understanding of student characteristics is used as a reference by the teacher to make plans such as designing classes in various styles, interests and backgrounds of different students. In addition, teachers are also required to be able to manage the class based on the students' needs, their potential and development. In differentiation learning, each student has different learning stages from one student to another. Therefore, teachers need to provide specific ways for each student and provide opportunities for them to develop optimally.

In relation with this, Tomlinson (1999) in Padmadewi, *et al* (2021) offers the three methods of differentiating instruction for any curricular area, namely:

**a. Modifying the content**

In the process of modifying content, it is important to adjust with different students' need. Teachers should decide the main units that can be identified first from the syllabus. Then, after the main content is defined, the complexity is adjusted with the students' need. In modifying the process, the teachers can utilize a various strategies and techniques to teach each concept that can be customized to the students' need.

**b. The process of learning**

Autism students are provided with learning materials that are appropriate to their abilities, and teachers use direct learning to give better guidance to students. In addition, teachers could also implement a learning system based on students' levels. For example, for smart students the teacher can provide many opportunities for them to work alone and study all aspects of the topics in the syllabus. Meanwhile, students with average abilities could be given assignments to work in groups with teacher's assistance occasionally. Besides that, for students who have difficulty, the teacher could provide direct learning to guide the students well.

**c. The final product**

The final product of differentiation learning is carried out by varying the level of tasks or projects complexity made by students and the number of tasks that should be completed by students. Learning products are ways in which students show and expand what they have learned which vary according to the level of student's ability.

There are three ways in implementing differentiation class could be seen in the following table.

Table 1. Three ways to implement the differentiation class

	Challenged Students	Average Students	Advanced Students
Content	Three topics	Five topics	All topics components
Process	Mostly guidance by the teacher	Group work with teacher's guidance occasionally	Direct instruction by the teacher
Final Product	Based on the topics and assignments given by the teacher	Based on the topics and assignments given by the teacher	Based on the topics and assignments given by the teacher

In addition, besides modifying content based on students' abilities, teachers can also modify the learning process by giving students the opportunity to choose material according to their interests. The material chosen must be based on the themes in the syllabus, and it can be translated into some topics such as language, art and science. The teacher gives time to students to do activities that students are interested in. In addition, the teacher also provides opportunities for students to work on assignments based on their abilities in class, therefore students can relate what they have learnt to what they need. Differentiation learning is arranged in a flexible way and it can be discussed to support the students' optimal growth and development.

Meanwhile, in differentiation learning the teacher also designs various types of assignments as alternatives given to students based on their level. For example in the language area, the teacher designed three types of activities, namely mentioning five types of fruits in English and talking to friends and the teacher about the fruits they liked, matching pictures of fruits with their names in English, and writing down the types of fruits in English. Matching pictures with their names in English is designed for students who have difficulty in that topic, thus the picture can be used as an indication of what name is meant by the picture. Students with special needs are very suitable in this way, they can know and do something by looking at the examples in the picture.

### ***Constructivism as an English Learning Approach***

Constructivism is a learning approach besides Differentiated Instruction which can be used for special needs students especially autism. The main concept of constructivism theory is that people construct their own understanding and knowledge through direct experiences and reflecting on those experiences. The nature of constructivism learning reflects how people understand their experiences (Taber, 2011).

According to Ratminingsih, et al (2021) Constructivism is a theory of learning that involves important aspects such as culture, context, literacy, language, interests and needs of students, personal experience, reality interpretation, and application of knowledge. Nowadays, constructivism approach that is most often used because it is considered the most supportive language learning. The constructivist approach focuses more on innovative activities and efforts to gain knowledge so that when compared to students taught by traditional (conventional) approaches, the academic results of children in constructivist classes are better. The most important thing in the constructivism approach is that the development of knowledge occurs effectively through the experiences and social interactions of children in everyday life. This social interaction can be done with peers or with teachers and parents of students. Therefore, when guiding English learning teacher should always think about the learning experiences that can be given to the student, and what they can learn from this experience and how they implement it.

The implementation of Constructivism Approach for Autism students could be done by giving explanation of the material in order to build up their knowledge until they understand what is being explained by their teacher. After the students understand, the teacher could give assignment to evaluate their understanding of the topic.

For effective implementation of constructivism in inclusive classroom especially for autism students, it could be used some strategies, such as:

1. Using various songs and games in teaching learning process  
Dhermawati *et al* (2019) stated that in language development, song take an important role as a flexible resource that usually used by teacher. The song is helpful for the teacher to teach English language vocabulary for mentally disabled students. The students want more fun in any teaching and learning process and it can give the students the joyfulness in learning English language vocabulary.  
Meanwhile, game becomes the best strategy used in teaching English for students, including students with special needs. According to Ratminingsih (2019) games have various educational advantages and can get students to use language in class rather than correcting forms of language. Games can encourage students to interact, work together, creative and spontaneous in using language in a meaningful way.
2. Involving students in solving problems. Involving autistic students in solving problems has the goal that these students will learn to control their emotions and solve problems independently. For example, students can tidy up their desks after eating and clean up their own toys.
3. Using sources especially for students with special needs. For example utilizing physical therapy equipment such as standing frames, so students who typically use wheelchairs can stand when the other students are standing and more actively participate in activities.
4. Instructions designed to have students work at different levels in different groups and on different tasks in the classroom.

### ***The Whole Students' Approach***

Padmadewi, et al (2021) stated that learning for children with special needs aims to develop students as a whole, including cognitive, psychomotor, and attitude and mental aspects of students. In providing learning, teachers must treat individual aspects to develop in a balanced and intact manner. Teachers do not only emphasize cognitive aspects, but also need to pay attention to aspects of the skills and attitudes of each student. Therefore, teachers must be creative, sensitive in the learning process and provide balanced services. Teachers can also provide holistic actions that train students in terms of cognitive, psychomotor and attitude.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the discussion above, it could be concluded that Autism is a disorder of social development that affects the development of the brain, and hence the behavior of a person. Social development and communication are the major distraction. There are some characteristics of students with Autism disorders, namely communication, social interaction, sensory disorders, play pattern, behavior and emotional. Besides that, Autism students need special approach in order to encourage students' interest to follow the learning process. There are three approach that could be implemented in English language learning, such as Differentiated Instruction as an Individual Based Learning Approach, Constructivism as an English Learning Approach, and The Whole Students' Approach. In differentiated Instruction, the teacher could follow three methods in teaching autism students. First, the teacher could modifying the content. In modifying the process, the teachers can utilize a various strategies and techniques to teach each concept that can be customized to the students' need. Second is the learning process. Autism students are provided with learning materials that are appropriate to their abilities, and teachers use direct learning to give better guidance to students. Third is the final product. Learning products are ways in which students show and expand what they have learned which vary according to the level of student's ability. The second approach is Constructivism. Constructivism is a learning approach which can be used for special needs

students especially autism. The main concept of constructivism theory is that people construct their own understanding and knowledge through direct experiences and reflecting on those experiences. The effective implementation of constructivism approach for autism students were using various songs and games, involving students in solving problems, using some sources especially for students with special needs, and designing learning instruction. Meanwhile the Whole Students' Approach emphasize not only on students' cognitive aspects, but also need to pay attention on skills and attitudes aspects of each student.

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