

Neurodivergent Students in Regular EFL Classrooms

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SUBMISSION TRACK

Submitted : 15 July 2024
Accepted : 24 July 2024
Published : 25 July 2024

KEYWORDS

Neurodivergent, Neurotypical,
EFL Classroom


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ABSTRACT

The number of students who are diagnosed as neurodivergent person or seem to have the symptoms has increased in regular classes, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms are no exception. This study aims at explaining the condition of classroom atmosphere due to the presence of neurodivergent students, teachers' viewpoint, parents' perspective, and strategies in managing the classroom, and what experts say about this issue. This is a qualitative study by which the data were obtained from an observation and interview with the teachers from two branches of a language institution in West Sumatra. Based on the teachers' viewpoint, the result showed that there were almost no significant barriers for neurodivergent students to understand the target language, but their presence disturbed the communicative task. Then, based on the parents' perspective, there were parents who admitted the condition, and there were who did not. However, all parents wanted their children to go to the educational institution where diversity is accepted or just to be enrolled in a regular educational institution. Looking at this phenomenon from different perspectives hopefully lead to the idea of an appropriate approach for these students to integrate into the regular EFL classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of neurodivergence has been around for more than a decade, since the late 1990s, when a sociologist, Judy Singer, coined the term. The first term that people were familiar with was autism; it was first introduced by a physician, Leo Kanner, in 1943. However, due to the different symptoms shown by those who are diagnosed, neurodivergence is the most appropriate term to cover them all, such as autism, ADHD, bipolar, anxiety, and other intellectual and emotional disorders. Thus, in this article, the term “neurodivergent students” is used to describe those students who have neurological problems, and “neurotypical students” are used to describe those who have no symptoms or who are so-called normal.

Today, neurodivergence issues are mushrooming around the world. The way neurodivergent people react and think is different from neurotypical ones. When it comes to children and adolescents, this condition absolutely affects the school environment. And unfortunately, not all levels of society are ready for this, especially in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Although the number of inclusive schools, where students with neurological problems can enroll, has increased since 2013 especially in Padang City (cited from Antara Sumbar newspaper, 2021), most of them are primary schools. Therefore, the students who were already in secondary school had to study in public schools that did not have such a program. However, not all students, who graduated from these inclusive primary schools, get secondary school with the same program because the numbers are not compatible.

Not only inclusive school teachers are aware of the increasing number of neurodivergent students, but also some teachers in regular public schools and private courses. This condition requires teachers who do not receive data and training related to these students to adjust their teaching strategies, attitudes, and even their perspective to include these students in the regular academic environment. Despite their small numbers in the class, their existence can have a significant impact on other students because other students are also aware of the differences that these neurodivergent students have.

To illustrate, there was an English class in a language institution that consisted of 11 students, one of them was a neurodivergent student. The students were about 10 years old. At first glance, there was no difference between him and the other students, but at every stage of the lesson, he showed unusual behavior, such as repeating the exact same word that had nothing to do with the lesson, walking around the class for no reason, crawling on the floor, or mumbling, especially when the teacher was taking attendance or when the teacher was talking. The teacher had used some tricks to get him to behave well, such as reminding him of classroom rules, giving positive reinforcement when he successfully followed the rule, and making it clear that his behavior was inappropriate. But every session seemed to be a new him. Thus, the unusual behavior was always there to disrupt the class.

Since attention could not always be given to him because other students needed it as well, the teacher, who had no inclusive training at all, sometimes ended up ignoring the inappropriate behavior and continuing with the lesson. And sometimes this trick successfully stimulated him to join the lesson, but surprisingly he was the fastest and smartest in understanding the material, he could understand and perform well. However, as foreign language teaching and learning requires communicative task, he failed in team work and made other students talk about him. A funny thing was that the other students often became observers who reported his behavior to the teacher at the beginning of the lesson. It was not healthy for both neurodivergent and neurotypical students.

Another case came from a language institution in Bukittinggi City which has a class consisted of 6 students (9-11 years old) and one of them was neurologically different. This student was cognitively intelligent. He was a willing learner who almost always performed well. But one of his classmates knew that he had some difficulty in controlling his emotions, so this so-called normal child often disturbed him outside and they brought the problem into the class. The teacher often had to deal with the chaos before the lesson began. Of course, this teacher had already implemented some strategies to get them to behave well, but they only worked for a few sessions, and they would do it again. The worst part was that the neurodivergent child could not control his emotions or defend himself; he would hit the table, seem confused, and even breathe heavily.

The illustrations above give a clear picture that there are some unusual situations a teacher may face when neurodivergent students and neurotypical students are in the same class, both for cognitive and affective aspects. Sometimes a problem may come from the neurodivergent students and sometimes it may come from the classmates who know that he/she is different. Every teacher absolutely knows that in the regular English class there will always be some problems with the regular students, let alone with the neurodivergent ones. Therefore, since neurodivergent students can bring unexpected situations on the first place, it is highly

recommended for English teachers to put themselves into some understandings regarding this issue.

METHOD

This study was conducted by using qualitative study. The data were obtained from an observation in two EFL classrooms and interview with the teachers from two branches of a language institution in West Sumatra which were in Bukittinggi City and Padang City. The data were then classified based on the categories discussed in this research. Then, the classifications were narrated and analyzed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Neurodivergence and English Classroom

There are some areas related to diversity in human life, such as biodiversity, social and cultural diversity. These diversities are mostly accepted in the environment because they fit the rules and norms of the society; people talk a lot about ethics, for example, it is not ethical if they cannot accept different ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, language, religion, even sexual orientation. But when it comes to different behavioral and emotional matters (especially in academic setting) due to neurological diversity, the differences get lack of tolerance.

Unacceptable attitudes towards learning have emerged since few decades ago. Students who have autism, ADHD, bipolar, anxiety have shown unusual intellectual and emotional differences or even unusual. But due to their increasing number, they have become the concern of many parties related to the education system because of the changes they cause in the typical academic setting. For example, an autistic student is able to bring something completely different to the class. Grandin and Panek (2013) mention some symptoms related to autism that Grandin herself experienced, such as destructive behavior, inability to speak, sensitivity to physical contact, fixation on spinning objects, and others.

The level of these symptoms is completely different. Just like what Breakey and Hesmondhalgh (2001) noted from an autistic student, the areas of difficulty this student has are over-sensitive to criticism, rigid in attitude, hates failure, poor organizational skills, unaware of the feelings of others. While some of the strengths are having a sense of humor, socializing with adults and peers, confidently using reference books and dictionaries.

Then ADHD, which stands for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, is a condition where the neurodivergent people have problem with attention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. Ryan (2014) stated that ADHD resulted from trauma to the neurology of the brain. It can be something that someone has since he/she was born or when he/she grows up. Scientists believe that some factors done during pregnancy like cigarette smoking, drinking alcohol, consuming certain food additive and having brain injuries can cause ADHD to the children.

There are some symptoms shown by ADHD students, and Fisher (2016) lists the basic symptoms of inattention, some of which can be found during the teaching and learning process, such as not paying close attention to details, having messy work, seeming not to listen, being easily distracted by trivial noises, and being forgetful. Meanwhile, a hyperactive student can be seen from some symptoms, such as fidgeting in the seat, acting inappropriately, excessive

running or climbing, and talking excessively. And then, the basic symptoms for impulsivity are impatience, blurting out answers, interrupting others frequently, initiating conversations at inappropriate times, talking excessively, and fidgeting in the seat.

Although children with ADHD have difficulties with attention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, they are energetic and creative. Saul (2014) notes that while most children with ADHD have learning disabilities, they also have higher IQs than their average peers. Moreover, Saul argues that ADHD cannot be used as a single term in diagnosing people because it is more into some conditions such as poor eyesight, bipolar, and depression.

These different emotions and behaviors shown by autistic and ADHD students absolutely give significant impact on English class. Learning a foreign language requires communicative competence. According to Bachman (cited in Zaim 2016), communicative language skill is the integration of language use and language performance. Strategy and context are used in the performance of communicative language proficiency. Knowledge structure, language skill, strategic skill, psychophysiological mechanism, and situational context are the components needed to create communicative skill.

The knowledge structure is about the topics to be discussed. It requires students to have knowledge about some topics. Then, language competence deals with the knowledge of language. It is divided into two major aspects: organizational competence, which is about grammatical competence and textual competence, and then pragmatic competence, which is about illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. To achieve the communicative goal, these components must be used.

However, the symptoms that neurodivergent students exhibit will fail some of the components. For example, blurting or talking excessively will interfere with rhetorical organization and cohesion, while being overly sensitive to criticism, being unaware of others' feelings, interrupting others frequently, initiating conversations at inappropriate times, and appearing not to listen will interfere with a task such as creating a conversation in a group or pair. Another example is anxiety; it will disturb the student when he/she has to give an oral presentation.

Thus, not only are they failing themselves, they are failing neurotypical students because they have to work together. Therefore, it requires an understanding of neurodivergence for those who are neurotypical. According to Armstrong (2012), the term neurodivergence helps the so-called normal people to accept that human nature and brain are complex and rich, which gives an understanding to any situation that might be related to people who suffer from the symptoms. In line with Armstrong's statement, Pollak (2009) says that the terms disabled, abnormal and impairment are avoided and changed with neurodivergence to respect the differences of human brains or as Perry and Herrera (2014) say "normalizing neurodivergence". In this way, those who suffer from neurodivergence can gain the same respect as those who do not.

However, no matter how much the experts suggest equality, the neurodivergent students obviously react differently than the neurotypical ones. Sometimes educators who have not been trained in this area find themselves caught in the middle, trying to accept that these students have talents on the one hand, but on the other hand finding it difficult to deal with unexpected

behavior that is different from what is written in the rules. Either way, the truth is that they are there, in the class.

2. Teachers' Perspective

Many English teachers have shared their experiences with neurodivergent students, including several English teachers in West Sumatra. Since many parents were not familiar with this and hardly knew what to do, they ended up sending the children to public schools or private courses that did not have an inclusion program yet, and did not talk much about the children's condition. Even if the parents did not give such information, the teachers knew that there was something different in the behavior of their students, but they were not able to know what kind of neurological differences the students had. Due to lack of information and training, teachers just adapted and adjusted based on the condition they found during the teaching and learning process. It disturbed the atmosphere of the class because the chaos had been formed since the first meeting.

In the English class, teachers who do not have prior information or training about neurodivergent students may be surprised by the reactions of neurodivergent students. An English teacher in a language institution in Bukittinggi City revealed that she was quite surprised with one of her students in English for children program. One of her students kept repeating the word "cat" in class. It really had nothing to do with the lesson. In fact, the student was smart, he could use the phrases and expressions he had learned, and he did the exercises quickly. Thus, when he had nothing to do, he would crawl on the floor and act like a baby, even softened his voice like an infant.

At first the teacher tried to make the student understand, but he just listened to the advice without showing any regret, he even smiled a few times. Then in the next meeting, when he repeated the behavior again, the teacher tried to remain him about the class rules and the consequences if he broke them. Again, he did not pay attention; he remained silent and continued to smile. In fact, he could do the exercises given or gave some kind of mini presentation well. He was apparently a fast learner, but when he had nothing to do after finishing his work, he would start crawling, mention the word "cat" or tease his neurotypical friends who forgot how to say an English word by mentioning the word out loud.

The teacher was quite upset with his attendance in class, but the teacher really wanted to get him to communicate well with his buddies. In one meeting, the teacher ignored him to let him know that he did not get the teacher's attention when he did so, and surprisingly, he behaved well in that meeting and accepted whoever the teacher paired him with. Then he would communicate with that student. But this strategy did not last forever, in another meeting he did it again, even though the teacher was already ignoring him. Thus, the teacher often got tired and did not know what to do with this boy.

Another case came from an intermediate program in a language institution in Padang City where all the students were junior and senior high school students. One of the students had a syndrome related to neurodivergence. However, since there was no medical information on whether the student was autistic or had ADHD, the teacher just tried to understand the situation. The student did not speak clearly, sounded more like he was mumbling, did not make eye contact every time he talked to the teacher or his peers, and had different sense of humor than his peers

did not laugh at because his humor was a kind of outspoken one. Then the teacher also noticed that the class often ended up in an awkward moment every time he gave his opinion because he sounded like mumbling even though his idea was so advanced and excellent.

He was good because he could use authentic expression in speaking. However, when it came to performing a communicative task, he got so nervous every time he had to perform a conversation or a presentation. But the teacher always tried to convince him that he could do such performances, and the teacher did not really put pressure on what he had to do. Meeting after meeting, he got better at getting along with his buddies, even though he often sounded like he was mumbling. The teacher was amazed with the diction, phrases, and expressions he chose or performed. He was obviously researching and learning many things on his own, but the way he did it was not as smooth as the other students, and sometimes his buddies were not really pleased with the way he said something because he sometimes became a bit sarcastic.

The last example was from a nice neurodivergent student. His parents also told the teacher that their son was different from all the other kids. He was the smartest in the class, but he could barely control his emotions. When he was happy, he overreacted, which was inappropriate for his age, acting like a toddler who saw a balloon. His friends often laughed at him. He did not really have good motor skills, hence every time the class played a game that required movement, he would lose and he would get really upset or move around like he was having a panic attack. Sometimes he was also mean. He would tease his friend who could not do the language. He also often commented innocently on the teacher's attitude without considering his teacher's feelings. For example, once his teacher came late because she got a flat tire, then he criticized the teacher without asking why.

The teacher sometimes decided to give him a lesson for his character development. Although he was neurologically different, the teacher chose to treat him normally. The teacher acted based on the need. She appreciated his good work, gave him reinforcement, taught him that things were not always the way he wanted them to be, that he could not always win or be the best, and showed anger. In other words, the teacher did not give special attention.

Being a teacher is all about having patience and passion, especially when it comes to teaching English in a neurodivergent class. In a regular class, students struggle to understand the language that is foreign to them; they must deal with different language patterns and new expressions; they must focus to understand and comprehend the skills. The above teachers had something in common: based on the observations made by the teachers, there were almost no significant barriers for neurodivergent students to understand the target language, but their presence disturbed the communicative task. The teachers found that the students were smart, but they completely distracted the atmosphere of the class. The teacher sometimes felt tired of the situation, but wanted to make sure that all students could achieve the goal.

3. Parents' Attitude

Autism in Indonesia has not yet come to the forefront. Latif (2016) states that there is no accurate data on autism in Indonesia, but the Indonesian Autism Foundation claims that there is a significant increase in the number of autistic children in Indonesia. It is true that the government already provides many inclusive schools, but many parents have not been socialized about it yet, and most of the schools provided are only primary schools, hence other students who are not in

primary school still face some obstacles related to their difference. In addition, there are still many parents who feel embarrassed, sad, or do not treat the child in accordance with their development as a neurodivergent child.

The fact that some parents do not want to reveal their children's condition has contributed to the minimum information teachers have about the students. A teacher in a language institution in West Sumatra shared her experience of discussing a child's strength behavior with the parent. The parent was not cooperative. She ended up blaming the teacher, saying that the reason was because her son did not like the teacher and it was the teacher's fault. This assertion made the teacher upset because she really wanted to help the children if she knew exactly what was happening to the child so she could prepare the strategies.

Different reactions will lead to different results of neurodivergent levels. Parents who deny that the child has the syndrome do not give the right reaction, as a result the children cannot develop well. Then, when they start their formal education, they might bring more difficulties to the teacher. Evidence from the field showed that a confession from the parents helped the teacher to understand the student. A parent of an EFL student in West Sumatra told the teacher that her child was different from typical students. It really helped the teacher to prepare herself to face the student. She reacted properly when the child had an unreasonable attitude.

Another English teacher also shared her experience of talking to a parent of a neurodivergent student. The parent admitted that her child was different from neurotypical, especially in terms of controlling emotions such as anger and happiness. She recognized her child's condition because one of the family members also had the same syndrome, but she never went to a doctor or specialist to check her son's condition. Her son was the smartest in the class, but she was very sad about her son's neurological problem. Therefore, parents' attitude towards neurodivergence somehow gives contribution to the English class. Getting the data about the students will help the teacher to prepare himself from the first meeting. Moreover, Armstrong (2012) states that by understanding neurodivergence, the teacher will respect the students unique brains and try to find out the best learning environment for all students.

4. How to Unite the Differences

There are some facts based on the situations found in EFL classrooms. First, neurotypical students need to be introduced to diversity in the first place. From the examples above, the neurotypical students obviously did not give proper support to the neurodivergent students. It is better for teachers to open the first meeting by discussing such a topic and asking students to respect each other. The teacher's presentation must be subtle so as not to show any intention to talk about certain students by presenting the topic as the latest issue to be discussed in a modern English class.

Second, neurodivergent students can sometimes be mean. Sometimes people assume that neurodivergent students are always the victims of bullying, but there are some cases that show the opposite. Because most of them are smart, have different action and humor, and do not really process figurative language, they sometimes tease their peers. When the buddies give a reaction that can trigger one of the syndromes, they cannot control themselves either.

Third, the communicative task is likely to be done in the class. By giving the neurotypical students an understanding that neurological differences are already accepted today and that they will have neurologically different types of classmates, the students will hopefully be able to be cooperative; get along with the neurodivergent ones and support each other in doing the communicative task.

CONCLUSION

Being neurologically different does not mean a student cannot learn a foreign language. In fact, they are often the best and brightest in the class. However, their existence can create an uncomfortable atmosphere and interfere with other students' communication, which is an important part of a language class. Understanding this issue is a crucial part, as one of the efforts to develop their amazing gift, give them equal right to learn and smooth the learning process for neurotypical students. Moreover, the parents' attitude towards this issue is important, hence it can help the teacher to prepare the class from the first meeting.

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