

## Challenges and Strategies in Teaching English to Autism Spectrum Disorder at SLB Pelita Nusa Pekanbaru

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching student with special needs could be complicated. This research aimed to define English teachers' challenges in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This research was conducted at SLB Pelita Nusa Pekanbaru using qualitative methods within a case study research design. In-depth interviews with two English teachers, observation, and documentation were used as data collection techniques. Based on the results, teachers faced several challenges in teaching English to students with ASD that are closely related to the characteristics of the children themselves. The challenges could be regarding students' mood and emotional regulation issues, tantrums and behavioural issues, verbal communication barriers, short attention span and memory retention issues, students' repetitive and restricted behaviour, lack of motivation, and external factors such as parental influence. To address these issues, teachers used various strategies such as repetition in learning, using visual aids and technology, simplifying the instructions, adjusting the phase of learning, and collaborating with the parents. This research provides practical insight into teaching English to students with ASD. It highlights the necessity for teachers to be patient, creative, adaptive, and collaborative when teaching English to students with ASD.

**Keywords:** challenge, teaching strategy, autism spectrum disorder

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### INTRODUCTION

Every human has a right to get an education regardless of their condition, including those with special needs. The idea of inclusion emerged as an encouragement of the value of human diversity (Shutaleva et al., 2023). This idea then has expanded to various fields, including education, where people with special needs should be actively involved. Inclusive education is increasingly becoming a significant concern in the world of education because it emphasizes the rights of every child to get education, it involves children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complicated developmental syndrome that causes continual difficulties with social interaction, restricted interest, and repetitive behaviours. World Health Organization (WHO) confirms that about 1 in 100 children experience autism. Around 50% of children with ASD have delays and abnormalities in language and communication (Biran & Nurhastuti, 2018). In addition, Boucher (2022) explained that the characteristics of ASD children are impairments in social, emotional, and communication. Also, ASD children are frequently exposed to Repetitive and Restricted Behaviours (RRBs). As a result, teaching students with ASD, particularly in the context of language learning, could be complicated and require specialized strategies. In teaching English as a foreign language, teachers may face more difficulties in delivering lessons effectively due to students must acquire unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar structures with their language and cognitive impairments.

Hashim et al. (2021), in their study, showed that in teaching English as secondary language to students with ASD, teachers often struggle to adapt, adopt, and customize teaching materials. Furthermore,

in terms of teaching English skills, Apriliyanti (2023) in her study, revealed that teachers face difficulties in engaging students and communicating effectively. At the same time, Zarina et al. (2024) found challenges in teaching reading comprehension for students with ASD regarding communication, sensory processing, abstract thinking, and language structural deficiencies.

While previous studies have highlighted general difficulties and strategies for inclusive classrooms, there is still a lack of in-depth studies that concentrate on the specific difficulties and approaches associated with teaching English as a foreign language to ASD children, especially in the Indonesian context. Thus, this paper discussed the actual challenges faced by English teachers in teaching English to students with ASD at SLB Pelita Nusa Pekanbaru and the implemented strategies to overcome the challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Autism is a neurological and developmental disorder caused by a particular brain abnormality that affects people in several aspects. According to Frith (1996), Autism is a developmental disorder that consistently impairs social, communication, and cognitive abilities. This condition has a distinctive pattern of poor intact and even higher cognitive ability, setting it apart from most mental handicaps. In addition, Bernier et al. (2020), in their study found that 1/3 of ASD children have an impairments in cognitive abilities. Furthermore, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has several characteristics and symptoms that can be diagnosed at any age. According to (Boucher, 2022), the characteristics of ASD are:

### a) Impaired Social Interaction

According to Parepa (Wardany & Apriyanti, 2022), Social interaction necessitates a desire to connect with others and practical communication abilities. However, children with ASD particularly struggle to understand the conversation and isolate themselves from interacting with others.

### b) Emotional Impairments

Emotional impairments in ASD can often be outlined as Alexithymia. According to Bagby (in Oakley et al., 2022), Alexithymia can be defined as difficulties in identifying, interpreting, and describing feelings. These conditions lead to issues in the way ASD children express their emotions.

### c) Communication Impairments

Communication impairments are the most common symptoms of ASD. Biran & Nurhastuti (2018) in their study stated that around 50% of children with ASD have an abnormality in language and communication. These conditions can be seen as issues in expressing language, receipt language, impairments in articulation and pronunciation, and limitation of the use of language (Williams & Williams, 2010).

### d) Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours (RRBs)

Children with ASD have a desire to follow a set of daily patterns and obsess over a specific subject. When they cannot follow the patterns, it will lead to high distress and behavioural issues.

As a result of those conditions, teaching children with ASD can be complicated, especially in teaching foreign languages. Thus, this study uses theoretical Autism Spectrum Disorders symptoms and characteristics as a foundation of the research, which helps the researcher to discover challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to ASD regarding their different characteristics.

## METHOD

To explore challenges and strategies in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, this study implied a qualitative research method through a case study research design as it offers profound insight into people's life experiences (Creswell, 2014). This study was conducted at SLB Pelita Nusa Pekanbaru, from January until April 2025. informants selected in this study using purposive sampling are 2 English teachers at SLB Pelita Nusa Pekanbaru. Participant 1 (P1) teaches young learners' classes, and Participant 2 (P2) teaches a classroom of middle and high school classrooms. The data were obtained through a combination of interviews and observation, which were then supported by documentation. The interview questions are partly developed by the theory of Autism Spectrum Disorder characteristics by Boucher (2022),

which includes: “What challenges do teachers face regarding impaired social interactions?” “What challenges do teachers experience in managing students’ inappropriate behaviour in the classroom?” “What challenges do teachers face in addressing students’ communication impairments?” and “What challenges do teachers encounter concerning students’ restricted and repetitive behaviour (RRB)?”. To gather deeper information about challenges and potential strategies, the interviews are semi-structured and open-ended based on the previous responses of participants.

Additionally, the observation was conducted to associate the data from the interviews with real-life context. The points for evaluation are derived from the interviews’ data. Furthermore, to gain credibility, documents such as lesson plans, students’ worksheets and exam sheets, and students’ grades are collected as supporting data for this study. The data was then analyzed with thematic techniques, where deductions were implemented and themes categorized, which thereafter were interpreted descriptively.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that teachers faced several difficulties in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, teachers also develop strategies to overcome these challenges and to assist students with ASD in their language learning. The study's results are structured into two main categories: challenges in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders and strategies implemented by English teachers to overcome those challenges. The outcomes of the study are presented below:

**Table 1. Results’ Outcomes**

Challenges	Effects
Mood and Emotional Regulation Issues	Refusal in learning and behavioural issues
Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours	Disengagement in classroom activity
Communication Barriers	Difficulties in understanding students’ needs and give instructions.
Short Attention Spans and Memory Retention Issues	Obstacles in achieving learning objectives on time
Variability in Cognitive Abilities	Differentiated lessons in a single classroom
Regarding Teaching English Skills	Difficulties in delivering lessons due to students’ limited abilities
Regarding External Factors	Affected students’ behaviour and ability in school
Strategies	Objective
Repetition in Learning	To overcome students’ memory retention issues and regain students’ focus
Simplified and use clear instructions	To overcome students’ communication impairments
Use visual aids, Technology, and Game-Based Learning	To engage students in learning
Call Students’ Name Repeatedly	To regain students’ focus
Adjusting Phase of Learning	To provide a compatibility learning
Classroom Managements	To maintain a safe classroom environment
Collaborating with Parents	To provides consistent support to ASD students

### The Challenges in Teaching English to Students with ASD

The study revealed several challenges faced by English teachers. Most of the challenges are regarding the characteristics of ASD, as stated by Boucher (2022), which are social impairments, emotional impairments, communication impairments, and restricted and repetitive behaviours. The main difficulties faced by teachers are regarding students’ emotional impairments. Mood fluctuation and emotional regulation of the students play a crucial role in their learning engagements as noted by P1: “*The biggest challenge (in teaching) is when he is not in the mood to learn*” (P1, Interview, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025). When students are in a negative emotional state,

they frequently disengage, throw tantrums, or behave disruptive. These emotional changes were unpredictable and significantly influenced the learning process. In addition to the difficulties regarding emotional impairments, inappropriate behaviour such as tantrums, aggression, and self-harm presented serious challenges in the teaching process which aligns with the findings from Brahim (2022). Teachers revealed that these behaviours affected learning activity and lead to obstacles in maintaining a safe classroom environment. Furthermore, Restricted Behaviours of ASD students can drive to disruptive behaviour. According to Boucher (2022), RRBs are generally observed as Repetitive Sensory-Motor Stereotypies (RSMs) and Insistence on Sameness (IS). RSMs indicated in this study based on interview and observation data are repeated movements (clapping hands) and the intense focus or use of objects (cutting the papers and flipping the book). Moreover, these habits can show a strong preference for a structured schedule. When the routine changes, students may become highly distressed, leading to disengagement from courses or refusal to participate in learning activities as explained by P1: *"they have a schedule which have neatly organized in their memory, if there is something missed, skipped or not in the order, he is anxious, might get angry, or tantrums"* (P1, Interview, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025). Teachers have noticed that these behaviours frequently impact learning as students tend to become more concentrated with their repetitive routines than with teaching activities.

Communication barriers also lead to difficulties in teaching English to ASD. Many students with ASD displayed an inability to speak a complete phrase or sentence as explained by P1: *"...because this Autism child has a communication disorder. They are also not able to say complete sentences, including subject, predicate, and object. At most, it is just two grammatical such as 'I eat'. Well, it is too hard for them to say, 'I want to eat this ma'am'"*. (P1, Interview, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025). This condition related to the kind of communication in children with ASD, stated by Ibrahimagic et al. (2021), where ASD children commonly pronounce single words, process simple phrases and instructions, and look when summoned by name. As a result of these conditions, teachers faced difficulties in making students understand instruction and engaging them in discussions. Furthermore, teachers also faced difficulties in understanding students' needs and feelings. This condition is related to Alexithymia in Autistic children, where they have issues identifying, describing, and interpreting their feelings (Oakley et al., 2022). In addition, observation in classroom showed that students struggle to understand the instruction if it is given only once. Teachers have to repeat the instruction to each of the students while simultaneously calling out their names.

Students' short attention spans and memory retention issues also posed significant difficulties in teaching English to students with ASD. Based on the interview, P2 mentioned that: *"When they memorize, they forget quickly. It hasn't been five minutes, and they've forgotten"* (P2, Interview, Jan 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025). Aligning with interview, observation showed that students with ASD tend to forget the lessons after several minutes of being taught, particularly when they lack interest. These conditions made the teachers repeat the lessons for a whole semester.

Another challenge was found regarding the variability in cognitive abilities among students. According to Schumann et al. (2010), from a neurobiological perspective, there are significant variations in the structure and function of the brain in children with ASD. Teachers noted that these factors made the lesson in a single classroom should be differentiated to meet the needs of each student. In some case, teachers are forced to lower student's learning phase and materials to fit students' ability as stated by P1: *"...depending on the children, if they are not able to fit his grade (as their age), we are forced to lower it..."* (P1, Interview, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025).

The challenges regarding teaching English skills are also found in this study. Teachers revealed that the students' lack of abilities causes the difficulties. For the reading comprehension lesson, students frequently showed an inability to read a word correctly. For the writing lesson, students' skills are limited, and they are only able to imitate and copy the teacher. Moreover, in listening lessons, the struggle comes from students' short attention spans, which leads to a lack of focus. While in speaking lessons, P2 mentioned: *"...the pronunciation is a bit difficult, because they are used to their mother tongue"* (P2, Interview, Jan 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025).

The study noted that the difficulties come from the inability of students to pronounce words correctly and the limited ability to speak one to two phrases.

Teachers also revealed the difficulties regarding external factors such as home environment and parental influence. Teachers observed that the emotional state of students, which caused inappropriate behaviour in school, frequently indicates stress, conflict, or an absence of routines at home. These also affect the speaking ability of students because they are more accustomed to using their mother tongue rather than English. Other difficulty aligns with Raudeliūnaitė & Steponėnienė (2020) where the teachers struggle to cooperate and communicate with the parents to create consistent learning support between school and home.

### Strategies Implemented by Teachers in Teaching English to Students with ASD

In response to the challenges in teaching English to students with ASD, teachers employed several strategies. The most significant strategy is repetition in learning; teachers noted that this strategy is used to overcome memory retention issues and students' short span of focus. This study found that to make sure students understand, teachers must repeat the lesson twice or more times. Teachers also ask students to follow the teacher to help students gain knowledge. In addition, simplified and clear instructions become strategies to overcome students' communication impairments, which sometimes go along with gestures and demonstrations. Teachers also revealed that they have to pay attention to the intonation as explained by P1: *"For autism, we can't be too gentle, but we can't be harsh either, which means it should be firm and clearly heard by the child, so it's not too soft"* (P1, Interview, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025). Utilized variations in their intonation will help maintain students' understanding and focus.

Another strategy found is closely related to the strategies offered by the British Columbia Ministry, which is mentioned in Lasintia et al. (2021) that teacher uses visual aids to engage students' comprehension and focus. According to the observation and interviews which further proven by documentation, teachers frequently use colourful worksheets found on the internet, such as the Pinterest app, because many students with ASD are visual learners, as indicated in Gladfelter et al. (2019). The study also found that the teachers sometimes use technology such as Quizziz and game-based learning such as word stacking games to foster active participation in learning, particularly in high school classes.

Moreover, to gain students' attention when they seem to lose interest and focus on learning, teachers call their names repeatedly. If this does not work, teachers approach them in a sensory way by tapping their bodies, as mentioned by P2: *"You must keep calling him, if he can't be called, touch them and then he comes back again (to focus). That's the method"* (P2, Interview, Jan 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025). In addition, teachers also allow short breaks with preferred activities (such as playing with toys or watching videos) for several minutes before continuing to the teaching activities.

Adjusting the learning phase also becomes a strategy for teaching English to students with ASD. Teachers adjust students' learning phases according to their cognitive ability levels as noted by P1: *"Even though they are in high grade, but the ability is still in elementary, the material that be given is elementary"* (P1, Interview, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025). In addition, the study found that at the beginning of the semester, students will take a test as a reference to determine students' learning phrases and grade levels.

For classroom management, teachers use strategies such as understanding each student's personality and character, also understanding the classroom conditions as noted by P2: *"For the class management, the first one is teacher must understand the character, the teacher must also understand the conditions in the classroom"* (P2, Interview, Jan 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025). According to the observation and interview, in some cases, when one of the students behaves disruptively, teachers have to instruct others to do some tasks while redirecting that student personally. This strategy helps maintain a balanced and safe classroom environment.

Finally, collaborating with parents is also essential in supporting ASD students' language learning. Kotsi & Robles (2023) find that the family environment is typically presented as one of positivity and cooperation, with a persistent goal of encouraging language-learning in ASD. By keeping in touch with parents, teachers will better understand students' characteristics, especially when teacher has just handled the



student as mentioned by P1 in the interview: “...if I just handle the students recently, it must be a routine to communicate with the parents” (P1, Interview, Jan 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025). Furthermore, by communicating with the parents, it also helps teachers discover students’ emotional state outside of school, which affects their learning process and provides more consistent support between school and home in language learning process of ASD students.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The study explored several challenges in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. One of the significant challenges was students’ mood fluctuation and emotional regulation issues, which led to a refusal of learning, tantrums, and disruptive behaviors of the students. Moreover, communication barriers also become one of the impactful difficulties. Another layer of complexity is also added by students’ repetitive and restricted behaviors (RRBs), short attention spans, memory retention issues, cognitive variabilities, and external factors such as parental influence and home environments. Despite these challenges, teachers implemented various strategies such as repetition in learning, simplified instructions, use of visual aids and technologies, implementing game-based learning, calling students’ names directly and involving senses to regain focus, utilizing appropriate intonation, and collaborating with parents to support English learning for students with ASD. The study revealed that teachers must be more creative, patient, and flexible and continuously adapt teaching to address the diversity of ASD students. Moreover, parents could support teachers through communication and cooperation and also help encourage the use of English to ASD students through songs or cartoons at home.

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