LITERATURE AS A TOOL OF AWARENESS: TRAITS OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS FOR STUDENTS IN ESP CLASS

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Abstract. *The prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in children is increasing from year to year worldwide. People suffering from this disease experience the feelings of otherness and isolation, even social exclusion. To raise awareness to this problem, every year a World Autism Awareness Day is celebrated on April 2. This paper will focus on the personality pervasiveness of ASD as depicted in the widely acclaimed novel "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" (2003) by Mark Haddon. The book, a detective story, which centers around the adventures of a teenage boy who suffers from many behavioral traits typical of ASD, can serve as a tool for teaching ASD behavior to the future experts in pedagogy and special needs assistants, who provide professional advice. It also provides a comprehensive lesson plan in ESP class with several tasks which build upon the means of critical thinking on the topic.*

Key words: *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), personality pervasiveness of ASD, literature in ESP, language teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) is an umbrella term for disorders which are defined by diverse behavioral, social and communication problems. They include: Autistic Disorder, Rett's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDDNOS). Grounded on a genetic error causes in 30% and multifactorial causes in 70% cases (Passos-Bueno, as cited in Pinheiro, 2020), they occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. The newly diagnosed cases are most prevalent between ages 3-17 and they are more common in boys. According to data gathered from all statistical sites, about 1 in 54 children has been diagnosed with ASD in the USA. Its prevalence from 2000 to 2016 show a significant number of diagnosed children, namely from 1 in 150 to 1 in 54 in the USA (2020; https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html).

In the European Union, a program Autism Spectrum Disorders in Europe (ASDEU) in 2015-2018 funded by the European Parliament was aimed at clinical and policy ASD research ever done in Europe. It was conducted by a network of 22 organizations from 14 European countries and it was designed to map a current situation on the topic and

propose solutions for families and experts in coping with this disorder. The research results showed that ASD prevalence in the EU is 1 in 89 children aged 7-9 years, although the numbers in different countries varied significantly (2018, p. 3).

The Slovak Republic did not participate in this survey, nor has it any official national statistics about ASD. Nevertheless, the National health information center prepares irregular statistical surveys and in its last annual report on Outpatient psychiatric care in 2017, which reported that there were 1 137 newly diagnosed persons whose disease was categorized under F80 - F89 - Disorders of psychological development, where ASD belongs (2018, p. 32).

The personality pervasiveness of ASD is an essential part of the curriculum for the future experts in pedagogy and special needs assistants at the university level of education. Our students attend the course English for Academic Purposes which is a requirement for study programs in pedagogy and tutoring and special pedagogy. It is aimed at learning vocabulary in the fields of pedagogy, education, and the teaching profession in English language level B2. Although the primary sources for teaching disciplines should be of theoretical and academic origin, literature written about ASD characters is a useful source to raise awareness about people with autism spectrum disorders including autism and Asperger syndrome. Some of the popular fiction books are *The Rosie Project* by Graeme Simsion or *The Question of the Missing Head* with a subtitle *An Asperger´s Mystery* by E.J. Copperman and Jeff Cohen, but the book which had the greatest impact on the promotion of ASP worldwide is Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.*

2. LITERATURE IN ELT AND ESP

Literature has a unique place in teaching foreign languages because it habitually functions as a background text for linguistic disciplines. On the other hand, instruction focused on appreciation of its aesthetic values is also stimulating for students. A literary text requires reading between the lines because the meanings are less obvious, pointing out symbolical and philosophical connotations or moral and ethical values. When reading, understanding the secondary meaning of the text is equally important to understanding the literal language. Overall, the role of literature is not only to use its specific language to comprehend information but first and foremost to strengthen critical thinking and communicative competence and finally, a self-reflection and creativity.

Geoff Hall (2015) raises awareness to literature in ELT and states some of the most important advantages of teaching literature. It brings:
- affective arguments (pleasurable, motivating, personalizing);
- cultural arguments (cultural knowledge, intercultural experience);
- psycholinguistic arguments (focus on form, discourse processing skills- inferencing, processing of non-literal language, tolerance of ambiguity and others).

Moreover, it:
- expands vocabulary,
- aids language acquisition in unspecified but general ways,
- 'gives a feel for' the language,
- develops more fluent reading skills,
- promotes interpretative and inferential skills,
- contributes to cultural and intercultural understanding,
- is linguistically memorable (mostly poems),
- is claimed to be pleasurable (p. 112).

While it is generally accepted that literature has a complex influence on one's personality, it must be also remarked that its integration, and the practical implication in coursebooks are lacking a wider usage. Jones and Carter (2012, p. 69) point out that understanding contemporary literary prose (B2) and long and complex factual and literary texts (C1) is a core requirement in CEFR (2010, p. 27). However, the results of their research show the unpleasant reality of integration of literature into the teaching process. To find out the actual willingness to use literary texts for teaching language awareness, they conducted a study with 12 teachers at the university in England and found out that "75% of these teachers feel that it is a useful classroom resource and 66.6% felt it can help to develop language and cultural awareness." On the other hand, the questionnaires also showed that half of the teachers are not sure whether using literary texts is what their students need and would enjoy and benefit from (Jones and Carter, 2012, p. 73).

The study shows that 50% of teachers do not see advantages of literature in ELT. The question is whether this result does not in fact reveal inner fear of teachers to work with authentic materials and their lack of ability to interpret literary texts. Literature is about life; it reflects, mirrors and manifests life and teachers should not be afraid to show their pupils and students its potential to change lives of people who are on the margin of the society. "Changing lives through literature" is a sentencing program based on the idea that reading literature and discussing it among a group of prisoners has a healing effect and creates feelings of resurrection. It began in 1991 as a cooperation of Robert Waxler, Robert Kane, and Wayne St. Pierre, a New Bedford District Court probation officer (PO). A professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and a District Court Judge in New Bedford initiated a successful mission of therapeutic practice of literature. It brings "an exploration into the complexity and challenges of human character and conscience, a way to connect with the human community, a way to engage deeply in language and conversation, and a way to make us all more self-reflective" (Waxler, 2003, http://cltl.umassd.edu/home-html.cfm). As a result, this experiment reveals that reading, discussing, interpreting, analyzing and enjoying literature is very important because it moves "people into their imaginations and then to take them on an enjoyable – and, in the best case, enriching – psychological journey in that imaginary space created through language" (Pennington, Waxler, 2018, p. 127).

Because the English language which is to be taught to and learned by students in ESP class is very specialized and varied in many aspects, "there is no ready-made teaching/ learning material available, as learners' needs are specific to the point of being idiosyncratic" (Stojković, 2019, p. 406). ESP materials should fulfil the four main principles: authenticity, groundedness, interdisciplinarity, and relevance (Hyland and Shaw 2016, p. 3). Therefore, it ought to be generally accepted that novels, short stories, and poems are comparable in richness and informativeness to articles about scientific or economic topics which are very common in ESP classes.

Chris Lima claims that literature is an inspiration for myriads of lesson plans and teachers should not be afraid to work with literary texts in the ESP course and just follow these rules:
1. the text is a primary focus of your interpretation and analysis;
2. select the text which is the most suitable for your students and which meets their cultural and linguistic competence;
3. make your students connect with characters and situations in the text;
4. thinking about words and images increases the understanding of the text;
5. pre-reading activities motivate students to get into the context of the text;

6. students should be given options for the type of homework or assignment;

7. connect the text to other means of artistic performance: film, song, painting, theatre, graphic design, etc.

8. sharing ideas, essays, videos, podcasts about the text makes reading interactive;

9. creative text enhances creative writing: poems, scripts, letters;

10. by reading literature, students learn a lot about the language and world around them (2016, https://www.onestopenglish.com/esp/eap/teaching-eap-literature/teaching-eap-literature-top-ten-tips-for-using-literature-in-elt/555130.article).

Thaler (2008) considers teaching literature a high priority in language acquisition concerning pupil's and student's ability to understand the complexities of issues in the books. He argues that the selection of an appropriate book is of utmost importance and criticizes the literary canon many teachers follow pointing out its old-fashioned and DWEM (Dead White English Males) tendency. While teachers of literature are aware of a generally accepted literary canon in the English language, there is an urging need to reconsider the list of accepted books and read and interpret works which reflect contemporary issues in our society, such as the position of minorities, women and interculturalism, the ecological concern of our planet, death, illness and mental health in the young generation, mixed families, but also social inclusion of disabled people and children and acceptance of otherness. In his alternative top ten chart, Mark Haddon's novel about Christopher ranks position number 7.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2003) is a crime story for young adults and adults which received immense success not only as a book but mostly as an adaptation in a theatre play in the UK and the USA; altogether several dozens of literary awards, five Tony Awards and seven Olivier Awards. Haddon reasserts his readers that Christopher's character was based on his experiences with children and adults with mental and physical disabilities, but he did not study the topic in detail and his novel should not be considered as a complex presentation of ASD and its symptoms: "I wanted Christopher to work as a human being and not as a clinical case study" (Haddon, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/73405/the-curious-incident-of-the-dog-in-the-night-time-by-mark-haddon/). Even though ASD has many outer manifestations in behavior, abilities and intelligence, the book is an inspirational account on a journey of Christopher's achievements: A level math test in which he got an A grade and the murder mystery novel about investigation of the death of Wellington he is writing in the book clearly demonstrates that even a boy who has huge problems with social interactions and metaphorical meanings has dreams and goals he attempts to achieve, and he can become successful. By stepping into this first-person narrative, students learn a different perspective on human condition and that it can affect or even change their lives. In fact, reading fiction is an imaginative psychological journey in *The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). The following lesson plan is for the students of EAP who will be qualified as experts in pedagogy and special needs assistants, and who provide professional advice on pupils' accommodation. It aims to raise awareness of ASD throughout a literary text about a boy whose behavior bear symptoms typical for Asperger Syndrome.

3.1. Lesson Plan

Topic: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time
Age: Young adults
Level: B2
Time: 2 x 90 minutes
Materials: a computer, speakers, projector, internet access
Aims: To learn vocabulary related to ASD, to learn how children with ASD behave
         and feel, to learn how to communicate with a child with ASD

3.1.1. Warm-up questions (10 min.)

What did you know about people with ASD before you read the book? Did you have prejudices? Did this book change your view on ASD? Did you find the story authentic?

3.1.2. Scrambled photographs (15 min.)

Use photos depicting a Slovak theatrical adaptation performed at Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra and place them randomly in your presentation to create a collage. Ask students to comment on what is happening in the photos and then reorder them so they are in a chronological order. *Tip*: You can use a snipping tool in MS Windows to save selected images from this website: https://www.dab.sk/inscenace/86-podivny-pripad-so-psom or browse the internet for some English and American performances.

3.1.3. A mind map of the characters (15 min.)

Ask students to create a mind map of the characters from the book and write down up to 3 characteristics per each.

List of characters:
Christopher
Siobhan – Christopher's teacher
Ed – Christopher's father
Judy – Christopher's mother
Mrs. Shears - the neighbor and the owner of Wellington
Mr. Shear - her husband
Mrs. Alexander - the neighbor
Wellington - the killed dog
Mr. Jeavons - the school psychologist

3.1.4. What happened? (15 min.)

Ask students to work in pairs. One student is a policeman who investigates the case and interviews a person about what happened during the night Wellington was killed. The second student is one of the characters listed above and he/she answers the questions about events from his/her perspective according to the book.

3.1.5. Who is Christopher? (20 min.)

Ask students to watch the video and take notes about Christopher's personality. While watching, focus also on Christopher's non-verbal communication. Analyze your observations in groups. Who is Christopher? (5:27) https://youtu.be/BX77tNvMj4Q

3.1.6. Christopher's likes and dislikes (15 min.)

Ask students to work in pairs and make a list of Christopher's likes/dislikes. Then discuss whether they also have some unusual likings and concerns.
The answers from the book (Haddon, 2003):

Table 1 Christopher's likes and dislikes

LIKES	DISLIKES
Dogs - hugging dogs	Lying
Murder-mystery novel – writing a novel	Proper novels
Things in a nice order – logical	Being in fronts – camping
Biscuits, Orange squash	Yellow color
Looking after Toby	Talking to strangers
Being on his own	Eating in the places he does not know
Thinking he is the only one in the world	People who scream and laugh at him
Reading books	Jokes – he does not understand them
Mathematics, Physics, prime numbers	To be with someone else in the room
Mrs. Shears - she makes things tidy	Hugging and touching, listening to people
Outer space	Crowds of people
Red color	Using public toilets

3.1.7. Matching (10 min.)

The numbered phrases describe the social skills problems of people with ASD. Read each phrase and explain the meaning of unknown words (Patrick, 2008, p. 19).
1. Awkward use of language, despite strong vocabulary and grammar
2. Poor understanding and social use of language
3. Difficulty interpreting and using nonverbal communication
4. Difficulty understanding the perspectives of others
5. Difficulty interpreting figurative language
6. A perceived lack of empathy for others
7. A preference for predictability and sameness
8. A tendency to have attention and organizational difficulties, despite average to above-average intellect
9. A tendency towards specific and intense interests
10. Difficulty integrating sensory information
11. Motor clumsiness or awkwardness
12. Problems regulating anxiety and mood

3.1.8. Christopher's behavioral difficulties (20 min.)

Ask students to connect characteristics of ASD above with Christopher's behavioral difficulties.

- Not talking to people for a long time
- Not eating or drinking anything for a long time
- Not liking being touched
- Screaming when I am angry or confused
- Not liking being in really small places with other people
- Smashing things when I am angry or confused
- Groaning
- Not liking yellow things or brown things and refusing to touch yellow things or brown things
- Refusing to use my toothbrush if anyone else has touched it
- Not eating food if different sorts of food are touching each other
- Not noticing that people are angry with me
- Not smiling
- Saying things that other people think are rude
- Doing stupid things
- Hitting other people
- Hating France
- Driving mother's car
- Getting cross when someone has moved the furniture (Haddon, 2003)

3.1.9. Show your emotions (15 min.)

Ask the students: "What emotions do these emoticons represent? Which are easy for Christopher to understand? Make a list of words, which represent feelings of each emoticon. Think of a situation in which Christopher feels this way."

Answers:
1. happy, delighted, cheerful, glad, blissful, joyful, lucky, etc.;
2. sad, unhappy, sorrowful, downhearted, melancholy, etc.;
3. winking, blinking, fluttering, flashing, sparkling, twinkling – (ironic), etc.;
4. mad, evil, angry, bad-tempered, etc.;
5. confused, baffled, mixed up, chaotic, etc.;
6. surprised, shocked, amazed, astonished, startled, etc.;
7. ashamed, abashed, embarrassed, etc.;

"These emoticons were popular in the early 2000s. Which new ones do you use in your everyday communication the most and what do they mean?" Ask your students to draw them on the board and vote for the most favorite one.

3.1.10. Metaphors (10 min.)

"People often talk using metaphors," says Christopher in the book. Do you know what the following metaphors mean? How do we call phrases with a figurative meaning?
1. I laughed my socks off.
2. He was the apple of her eye.
3. They had a skeleton in the cupboard.
4. We had a real pig of a day.
5. The dog was stone dead.

3.1.11. Poster (25 min.)

Ask students to create a poster about a murder mystery novel Christopher is writing and to focus on the following clues:

- Crime
- Suspects
- Motives
- Alibis
- Evidence
- Foreshadowing
- Weapon(s)
- Settings

3.1.12. Drama (35 min.)

Ask students to prepare a dramatic dialogue based on the events in the book.

4. CONCLUSION

Every year people celebrate a World Autism Awareness Day on April 2nd. The increase of children diagnosed with ASDs, including autism and Asperger Syndrome, is a significant signal for our society to pay attention to this disease marked with many behavioral symptoms. Our students, the upcoming experts in many working fields, are the future generation who will cope with such obstacles, as co-workers or teachers. The aim of the article was to show that literature is a tool of awareness and that it changes our perception of the world, likewise, it changes our personality and attitudes. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) also changed our perception of the problem. With its massive audience, the readers, and spectators, we came to realize that we experience otherness as something natural and close to our hearts and minds. Ignorance does not create discussion, on the contrary, it shuts the topic into a metaphorical box, although the elephant is still in the room. The lesson plan is made especially for experts in pedagogy and special needs assistants, but it might also be a valuable source for other professionals in health care – doctors and nurses. There are many other literary works written in English suitable for B2 learners which help us to better understand the people who are different. ELT teachers should not forget that such authentic materials can help to stop social exclusion and raise awareness about many other topics.

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