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The use of visual media when teaching the skill of writing to autistic students

KEYWORDS

autistic students, teaching writing,
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ABSTRACT

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It is believed (Zaorska & Trajdowska, 2013) that autistic students are usually visual learners. It seems that the use of visual media and visually based teaching methods may be beneficial for such students. The aim of the present research was to discover whether visual media can be useful while teaching the skill of writing to autistic students. Furthermore, attempts were made to find out the difference between visually based approaches and non-specific ones when it comes to teaching autistic students. As far as inclusive education in Poland is concerned, the research aimed at showing its efficiency regarding the students with autism. In this paper, we would like to present the findings of our research because we believe that they may be useful for teachers who work with autistic students.

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Introduction

Nowadays, there are more and more students with special educational needs in Polish schools. Głodkowska (2013) states that a student with special educational needs is usually a person whose intellectual abilities are below average. Also, she enumerates dyslexia, dyscalculia or dysorthography as the types of afflictions that the students with special educational needs may most often have. Apart from that, Głodkowska (2013) adds that also the students who are either chronically ill, those who are recognized to be socially awkward, or those who come from poor or dysfunctional families, are often qualified as those who need special care. Finally, the researcher (Głodkowska, 2013) observes that also autistic students are the students who need special attention. As many schools try to meet the students' needs, more and more inclusive schools are being opened. According to Baker (2006), the idea of inclusive schools is to enable the students with special educational needs to help them learn effectively and integrate with their peers. In other words, the aim is to create an environment that is free of discrimination where the students who have learning difficulties can learn and develop their skills.

The mission of inclusive school is to provide equal learning opportunities for every child. Basically, it means that the students with special educational needs are integrated with the students who do not have any learning difficulties. In practice, there are classes consisting of students who are, in a way, clearly different from other learners; for example, there might be a student with dyslexia, a student with autism and a highly gifted child in the same class. As Bieńkowska & Sajkowska (2011) rightly remark, the students with special educational needs follow an Individualised Education Programme, which is specially designed for them by the group of specialists considering their disorder. What is more, every integrated classroom should be taught by a leading teacher (also called a mainstream teacher) and a support teacher simultaneously. According to the Polish law, every teacher who teaches an integrated class should be provided with the help of a support teacher. The role of the support teacher is to help conduct (deliver) the lesson and take care of the students with special educational needs in particular. In this way the leading teacher has an opportunity to focus on other students being sure that the support teacher is able to take care of the students with special educational needs (SEN) and they are in good hands.

By attending an integrated classroom students learn how to cooperate with each other. The students with special educational needs may feel appreciated as they constitute a part of the group. The students without learning difficulties have an opportunity to observe how their classmates who have learning troubles be-

have. This might teach them how to be tolerant and understanding. Although the idea of inclusive education has many advantages, it also presents a challenge for teachers. Undoubtedly, the very idea is good, but the teachers have to work very hard in order to provide SEN students with proper education.

In this paper the focus is on the students who suffer from the autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Autism is a very complicated and unpredictable disorder. Lord & McGee (2001) believe that “autism is a disorder that is present from birth or very early in development that affects essential human behaviours such as social interaction, the ability to communicate ideas and feelings, imagination, and the establishment of relationships with others” (p. 11). This means that autism influences the development of a child in an inappropriate way. Autistic students have problems with communicating with others, as well as with showing their emotions. Additionally, such learners are usually unable to imagine, or even understand, abstract issues. In other words, such learners often prefer to work quietly alone, rather than be a part of a group. Also, they need to feel safe and secure, and they can feel that way when the level of repeatability and predictability during the lesson is maintained. There is also a belief that they are usually interested in one particular subject which is very important for them. Following a long description of such learners provided by Lord & McGee (2011), they do not like changes because they prefer stability. Based on the characteristics mentioned above, it seems that the educational process of autistic students may be difficult and challenging not only for them but also for their teachers.

As far as the education of autistic students is concerned, it may be a difficult and demanding process. The condition of such learners significantly influences their abilities to learn. As a result, many autistic students have problems with effective learning and developing their skills. When it comes to the English language, Zaorska & Trajdowska (2013) point out that the aim is to make autistic students able to communicate in this language at least at the elementary level. The two scholars emphasise that in order to give the autistic students a chance to master English, it is crucial to provide them with a well-organised form of education through all their schooldays and in the favourable development conditions.

One of many different approaches that can be applied while teaching autistic students, is the use of visual media. Different visual elements are often used by teachers when teaching autistic students, because it is believed that such students are usually visual learners. Not only Lord & McGee (2001), but also Ayu Sari Pus-pita et al. (2019) claim that autistic students can acquire the information better, if only it is supported by a visual element. The scholars think that many autistic students possess an extraordinary gift of learning new things and gaining knowledge

through their engagement within visual representation. This means that many autistic students may learn better if the teacher uses some visual elements during the lessons. That is why, following the arguments prepared by Zaorska & Trajdowska (2013), it is believed that it is more beneficial to teach autistic students with the use of visually-based approaches than with more general ones.

The visual media commonly observed as useful in language education entail, among others: pictures, photographs, flashcards, cards with pictures, posters, graphics and photo albums. Following Bieńkowska & Sajkowska (2011), there are also some modern types of visual media used by teachers, the most popular being multimedia presentations, and/or interactive whiteboards along with computers and projectors. Moreover, there are many programmes specially designed for the students who suffer from the autism spectrum disorder, like the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), or the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) programme.

Baker (2006) enumerates three main advantages of visual media. With the use of visual media, we can show or communicate our thoughts better. Another argument for using visual media is their permanency. Very often many students have problems with concentrating on a topic for a longer period of time and in this way they can miss the necessary verbal information. If the information is supported by visual aids, the greater the chance of remembering and acquiring the topics remains. And lastly, it is believed that visual elements usually attract people's attention and because of that they are often preferred during FL lessons.

During our research attempts were made to find out if the use of visual media by the teacher can exert positive influence on the development of autistic students' writing skills in English. When employing the skill of writing, you can come into communicative contact with others and thus convey important information. Also, you can express your feelings and thoughts on a piece of paper. The ability to write in a foreign language is significant because it is a form of communication recognized by many scholars (for example, Harmer, 2011) as a skill equally important to the skill of speaking. Writing is considered as one of four main language skills that every student has to master.

However, the process of learning to write may be difficult, especially for autistic students. According to Asaro-Saddler & Bak (2012), such students produce pieces of writing that look chaotic rather than well-organised. Some autistic students do not understand what should be included in their writing; therefore, they may have problems with conveying the information that is necessary. The two scholars point out that the students with autism are usually not able to understand some imaginary and abstract concepts. In consequence, they may feel stressed and

anxious whenever they are asked to write about something they have never experienced before. Taking all these problems into consideration, many attempts have been made to check if the use of visual media might be helpful to overcome these problems and improve the development of autistic students' writing skills. This is also where our research can be located.

Methods

The research was conducted in order to find out if visual media might be beneficial for autistic students when teaching writing in English. Attempts were made to check the difference between teaching English to autistic students with the use of visually-based approaches and with more general ones. In addition, the research aim was to discover whether inclusive education in Poland is efficient as far as the students with autism are concerned.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the present research. The research consisted of two parts. Firstly, a questionnaire survey was conducted on sixty English teachers who work with autistic students in nursery schools, elementary schools or high schools. The participants of the questionnaire were the members of different social networking sites for teachers. The questionnaire survey consisted of fourteen questions. The questionnaire was sent to the participants via the Internet and they gave their answers online as well. Afterwards, two other teachers of English, who had declared they teach the autistic students in the integrated classrooms, were voluntarily asked to give an interview. The first interviewee teaches one autistic boy whereas the second interviewee teaches three boys who suffer from autism. The interviews consisted of fifteen questions and they were conducted online. One of the interviews was conducted via Skype and the other one was conducted through Messenger. Both interviews were recorded.

Findings

The quantitative research showed that all the respondents accept the use of visual media when they teach autistic students. Also, the majority of the participants declared that they often use different types of visual media. The results clearly show that pictures, photographs, multimedia presentations and interactive whiteboards are most often used by the teachers. The two other questions from the questionnaire aimed at discovering if the respondents think that the use of visual media

can exert an influence on the development of autistic students' writing skill, and if the application of visual media encourages such students to master writing in English. The majority of our respondents were uncertain here (the answer 'rather yes' majored in the responses). Such uncertain answers of the teachers may be caused by the fact that there are so many things that contribute to the development of the students' language skills that is it difficult to say whether it is visual media that have the biggest influence.

Moreover, the results showed that the teachers believe that the students who suffer from autism react mostly in a good or very good way towards visually-based approaches. As far as the frequency of the teachers' use of general approaches is concerned, it turned out that 46,7% of the respondents sometimes use them, 33,3% often use them, 8,3% use them very often, whereas only 10% of the respondents admit they use them rarely. None of the respondents answered that they never use such educational approaches.

Additionally, the research showed that only 5% of the participants of the survey think that teaching autistic students with the help of visually-based approaches is not more beneficial than with the use of general methods. The vast majority of the teachers believe that visually-based approaches are more beneficial to some degree. These results suggest that teaching programmes containing visual elements are highly favoured and recognized as more effective when teaching the English language to autistic students. In addition, it was discovered that 55% of the teachers think that schools in Poland are not well-adjusted (or even they are definitely not well-adjusted) to teach autistic students properly. However, a total of 78,3% of the participants of the survey stated that autistic students are able to be taught effectively, (or even can be definitely taught effectively) while attending integrated classrooms. Additionally, the majority of the respondents answered that – generally speaking – integrated schools in Poland are well-prepared to teach a foreign language to autistic students. Those participants who said differently were requested to provide a justification for their answers. Most often the teachers answered that there are too many students in one classroom, as well as the number of support teachers is too scarce and thus the mainstream teacher is not able to devote their time for a particular student and take care of him or her individually. Also, the results show that there is insufficient amount of materials suitable for teaching the English language to autistic students. The results show that the education of autistic students in integrated classrooms is difficult but possible and that it might be efficient.

When it comes to the conducted interviews, the teachers said that their students' writing abilities consist mostly in copying or working with patterns of

sentences. However, the second interviewee claimed that one of her students possesses special abilities and his writing skills are above the average. This shows that autistic students differ among each other and that they can have different learning abilities; therefore, they can learn at a different pace. Both interviewees often use visual media while teaching the English language to autistic students and both of them agreed that the use of such tools is a good idea. Both teachers answered that they use flashcards, picture stories, posters, and cards with pictures. In addition, the second interviewee said that she uses a laptop together with a projector and an interactive whiteboard. It seems like the teachers try to be up-to-date and make use of modern technologies during the lessons. Similarly to the participants of the questionnaire, the interviewees were not sure if the use of visual media truly helps the students with autism develop their writing skills in English but the first interviewee mentioned that such tools enable her student to learn new vocabulary and that they are sometimes helpful in tracing specific exercises aimed at the development of the writing skill. The second interviewee said that the use of visual support helps the autistic students understand the topic of a writing task; it may also be a good idea for a warm-up or pre-writing task. In other words, it was claimed that visual media might be relatively helpful as a teaching aid for autistic students. One of the interviewees claimed that she cannot describe the reaction of her autistic students towards the tasks that contain visual elements whereas the other interviewee argued that her students really like them and take part in them willingly.

As far as the difference between teaching with the use of visually-based approaches and general teaching methods is concerned, the participants observed that the main difference is in the students' involvement. Both teachers said that their students are more interested in the lesson and more willing to participate in it when the teachers use some visual elements. In the participants' opinions the autistic students are not active if the lesson does not contain any visual aids. Moreover, the results show that the students with autism are not interested in the lesson that is not designed for them; therefore, they do not gain any knowledge from such a lesson. To sum up, the answers suggest that visually-based approaches might be better designed, while teaching the students with autism.

Both interviewees agreed that the students with autism can learn English effectively while being in integrated classrooms. The interview participants think that their students who suffer from autism have made some progress and each of them gains knowledge in their own individual way. Also, both interviewees point out the invaluable importance of the function performed by support teachers during lessons.

It seems that inclusive education of autistic students in Poland can be effective, but if it were to be recognized as effective, both the leading teachers and the support ones should cooperate.

Conclusions

The results of the research show that autistic students should like visual media and enjoy the lessons when the teacher applies such tools. Both interviewees confirmed that students with autism are more involved in a task or a lesson that contains visual elements. Also, the teachers who took part in the research claim that it is possible that the use of visual media may have an influence on the improvement of the autistic students' writing skills. This enforces the belief that autistic students are usually visual learners and they are able to learn effectively if they are taught with the use of visual teaching aids or visually-based approaches. What is interesting is the fact that both the survey and the interviews showed that quite many FL teachers do use new technologies and more advanced types of visual teaching aids during the lesson more often. The results indicate that the general or non-specific approaches are not efficient when it comes to the foreign language education of autistic students. This means that the character of the autism spectrum disorder makes such students unable to learn through general teaching methods. They have to follow specially designed approaches, and visually-based approaches may be a good idea here.

In addition, the research revealed that inclusive education in Poland might be efficient and that many autistic students are believed to learn effectively in integrated classes. The majority of the participants of the survey (as well as both interviewees) stated that – in their opinion – inclusive schools are ready to teach autistic students with moderate success. By attending an integrated class, autistic students can feel more accepted and/or they are easier noticed as being equal to non-SPE students as far as their access to education can be considered.. In such classes they are part of a group and they can socialise with their peers.

The information gathered from the quantitative and qualitative research indicates that visual media might be beneficial when teaching the skill of writing in English to autistic students. The students should be satisfied to learn a language with the help of various visual teaching aids and they may benefit from them during the lessons. In addition, the results show that visually-based approaches may be more beneficial for autistic students than general methods used by teachers.

What is more, according to the majority of the respondents, most of the schools with integrated classes in Poland are well-prepared to teach the students with autism, providing effective education for them.

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