

Teaching English to Students with Autism: Montessori-Oriented versus Audio-Lingual Method

^[1] Mahsa Rezvani^[1] Eastern Mediterranean University of Cyprus

Abstract- Students with special needs specifically those suffering from autism spectrum disorder experience considerable difficulties in learning languages. This, accordingly, requires making more effort, applying further skills and different teaching methods on the part of the foreign language teachers instructing these students. Therefore, this qualitative study was designed to examine the effectiveness of the Montessori-Oriented Method of English language teaching compared to the Audio Lingual Method. To this end, two English language teachers dealing with seven students with autism were selected from two educational centers for autistic children in Iran. Data obtained from interviews with the teachers, observations of language classes, and teaching documents were analyzed to compare the two methods under investigation. The results indicated that both Montessori-Oriented Method and Audio Lingual Method improved the students' English language productive skills; however, the Montessori-Oriented Method further contributed to enhancing the students' interaction with peers, increasing their motivation and making them more independent. This study yielded some pedagogical implications for teachers, teacher educators and educational material developers of students with autism.

Index Terms: Audio Lingual Method, autism, English language teachers, Montessori Method.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder is described as a lifelong developmental disability influencing the way in which an individual communicates and interacts with people around him/her [1]. This disorder has highly spread across the world. For instance, 1 out of 88 children born in the United States [2] and more than 30,000 Iranians who age below 19 years old suffer from autism disorders [3]. People with autism face various challenges regarding learning L2 [4]- [5]. It is indicated in [6] that some obstacles are existed for learning English language of students who suffer from autism such as lack of motivation, poor attention, lack of communicative skills, problem with dictation and composition. However, few studies have strived to discover the effectiveness of different methods of English language teaching to students with autism. Of all Methods, Montessori-Oriented and Audio-Lingual Methods were particularly the focus of the current study. English language teachers in two educational centers for autistic children in Mashhad, Iran, which were the focus of this study had frequently used Audio-Lingual Method of English language teaching. The focus of Audio-Lingual method is speaking achievement of students. In this method, Vocabulary and grammatical patterns are taught through dialogues and repetition; Moreover, substitution, transformation, and question-and-answer as some of the main drills in this method, are conducted based on the patterns in the dialogues [7]-[8]. [9] investigated the effectiveness of Audio-Lingual method and concluded that this method can be effective method of English language teaching, especially in beginner levels. Repetition of the

dialogues and the drills enable language learners to respond quickly and accurately in target language [10]. Numerous of researchers such as [11]-[12] and [13] have also pointed to the importance of provision of sufficient amount of input and repetition of lessons for L2 language learning. This is specifically vital in case of students with autism since they have concentration and verbal production problems [14], so the amount of sensory input and repetition of lessons are critical in teaching English language to them. In this line, a study on second language learning of learners with autism, it was concluded that learners with autism need extra time and more repetition in order to learn English vocabularies in comparison with normal students [5]. On the other hand, Montessori Method, which is based on self-directed activities without any control over the child in a well-prepared environment [15]-[16]-[17], can assist students with autism partially overcome their communication and language deficiencies [18]. One out of two English language teachers participated in this study attended to Montessori teacher training at the same time of the study. Therefore, Montessori-oriented teaching method was implemented in one of the aforementioned educational centers in order to investigate the influence of this method on learning English language of students with autism in compare with Audio-Lingual method. In the present research, it is of utmost interest to explore the effectiveness of Montessori-Oriented Method of English language teaching to students with autism compared to Audio Lingual Method which is commonly used in two educational centers for children with autism in Mashhad, Iran.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

With globalization, individuals' competence, intelligence, membership, social status, and the like are commonly evaluated by the way of using language to communicate together [19] and people with autism are not exceptions. Under certain conditions, for example in terms of immigrating to a foreign country, autistic people also need to acquire and use a foreign language but this important issue has frequently been neglected in previous research. Teachers and speech therapists who work with autistic individuals should be aware that they need more time and effort to learn a foreign language than normal students [5]. People with autism have kinesthetic, visual, and then auditory preferences for learning [20]. Reference [5] showed that students with autism cannot sit and listen to the teacher for a long time, so teachers should be patient and find the best of encouraging them to learn English. More importantly, some modifications in teaching method of teachers can enhance English language learning of students with autism. For instance, manipulation of the surrounding things or employing visuals, as showed by [21], resulted in promising outcomes in the development of L2 vocabulary. Reference [22] found that using visuals can facilitate L2 vocabulary learning by ESL students with autism. Moreover, another study [23] showed that modification of abstract concepts into more concrete ones, resulted in more tangible and easier to learn by autistic students.

According to the studies mentioned above, Montessori methodology can be helpful in assisting autistic children partially overcome their communication and language deficiencies, since this method gives priority to learning by means of a series of senses "from visual to stereognosis"[18], and is characterized by provision of further support for learning and tailoring activities to students' needs and capabilities [24] in a well-prepared environment which is highly committed to the laws of nature [17]-[25]. Although Montessori did not propose a particular theory for learning L2, the method and procedure can be applied to L2 with necessary adaptations. In this regard, [26] indicated that some characteristics of Montessori contribute to learning L2 including educational tools which are colorful, safe and of interest for students; professional educators who are keen observers and warm in communication; well-equipped environment in which students feel convenient during the learning process; parent's engagement so that they can be aware of children advancement; learning in small groups which allows children to be free and enjoy the learning activities under the surveillance of the teacher; and iteration in learning which assists children to explore the topics

several times. Reference [27] investigated the feasibility of the teaching and learning of the English language at lower secondary schools by the Montessori Method in Brno, Czech. The findings of her study showed that Montessori principles provide support to the natural growth of each human being within a learning process. Due to the aforementioned problems that students with autism have, more effort and further research are required to discover more effective method of teaching English language to them. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore how Montessori method may equip English language teachers with required knowledge and skills to teach English language to students with autism compared to Audio-Lingual method which is commonly used in two educational centers for autistic children in Mashhad, Iran.

III. METHOD

This study has a qualitative case study design and was conducted in two educational centers for autistic children in Mashhad, Iran. Furthermore, the data collection procedure last over a ten-week period of the spring semester in 2017. Two English teachers working in separate educational centers for children with autism participated in this study. They have taught English language to the students with autism using Audio-Lingual Method for 4-5 years. Both of them were female and their age were 26 and 31 years old. At the same time of the study, one of the teachers participated in Montessori teacher training and implemented the Montessori method in her classroom (Teacher A), while the other one (Teacher B) did not change her previous method (Audio-Lingual). Moreover, seven out of 11 students with autism studying English language as extracurricular activity were enrolled in this study during the spring semester of 2017 (three students in Teacher A's class, 4 students in Teacher B's class). The inclusion criteria for autistic students included not having limited verbal ability as well as severe medical conditions. The students were all beginners, 5 females and 2 males, and ranged in age from 14 to 17 years old.

Data was obtained from two sources including teacher observations through the semester, and teachers' individual interviews (prior and post to the study). The aim of observation was to identify how the teachers communicate with students, the teachers' management strategies and their teaching techniques. The interview contained 7 open-ended questions and aimed to elicit information regarding the teacher's general belief about English language teaching and the effects of their teaching method on their students' learning outcomes.

IV. RESULTS

The researcher made six 30-minute classroom observations and wrote field notes every session. Based on the observations of the researcher, very few pictures and posters were hung on the wall in Teacher B's class. The class also contained a board as well as common chairs and tables existing in a classic class. On the other hand, Teacher A's class included some shelves containing toys with a big lumpy label on them, a round table with some chairs around them and lumpy pictures of alphabet on the walls which could be easily touched by students. From the first sessions, it was also observed that Teacher A provided the students with more multiple media including songs, videos, flashcards, and pictures in compare with Teacher B. Moreover, Teacher A did not sit at her table and tried to move around the class, while Teacher B rarely used movement in the class, and was mostly sitting at her table. Teacher B corrected students' errors explicitly and asked the students to repeat the correct form several times until she assured that all the students know the correct word. More importantly, she dedicated long time to repeat the new lesson and the newly-learned items every session. The problem with this approach was that more time was spent on working with a weaker student and sometimes it made the other students feel board. Her class also lack pair and group work. Group works were limited to the class repeating the new vocabulary and sentences after the teacher.

On the other hand, Teacher A tried not to force a student to sit on the chair, look at the board or imitate her, and also had self-correction approach to error correction. The students could self-correct their errors either by receiving feedback from the Montessori designed materials for providing instant feedback (e.g. in case of error, the puzzle remained unsolved), or by observing peers or the teacher doing the same activity. Moreover, Teacher A's class contained more pair work activities. Students' observation also revealed that English language teaching through both Methods could help students to learn some limited vocabulary and two-word or three-word phrases (e.g. blue car and yellow apple). However, some differences were observed in the students' Motivation. For example, Teacher B's students seemed not to be interested in writing. In Teacher A's class, in contrast, the incorporation of the students' interested objects was an indirect vehicle to encourage them write (e.g. one of the students was found to write the letters on a sand tray with coins). Prior and post to the semester, two individual interviews containing seven questions also conducted. The first two questions aimed to elicit information about the required changes that need to be made to the teachers'

existing approaches to teaching English to the autistic students.

To answer these questions in the pre-test, both teachers mentioned that Audio-Lingual method of teaching suited the context of autistic students in which they were working, because students with autism can memorize the dialogues effectively. Teacher A further stated that:

...If I could change anything, I would have a blended class in which more-proficient students could assist the teacher in conveying the concepts of some English vocabulary to the less-proficient students. The classes with all less-proficient learners are very burdensome... In the post interview, Teacher A was founded to be predominantly interested in Montessori-based practices and games; However, she believed that she cannot give freedom to the autistic students as much as the Montessori educational system prescribe.

Regarding the perceived differences between the teachers' approach to teaching English to normal and autistic students, the teachers specifically noted that they would give more freedom to normal students and may take into account their opinions about the processes of teaching. Regarding what makes an English language instructor a "good" instructor for autistic students and the required techniques for their teachers, both teachers commonly believed that 1) a good English language teacher should have sufficient information about autism, 2) be familiar with autistic students' behavior and interest, 3) be able to establish a positive and effective relationship with autistic students. In this line, Teacher A commented: a good teacher should love autistic students and be patient with them, he should not have high expectations from autistic students, because they suffer from poor concentration or attention deficit... most of them also have sensory problems.

However, in the post interview, she believed that: a good English language teacher should be flexible and creative. They should provide the students with opportunity to work independently... The next two questions addressed the challenges that autistic students usually encounter while learning English language. As both teachers stated, most of their autistic students were not interested in learning English, since it was demanding for them to learn a new language. In this regard, Teacher B stated that: One of the obstacles in acquiring a second/foreign language by these students is that they do not have imagination power and thus, cannot understand the meaning of some abstract words and concepts even in their first language. Therefore, they cannot develop a large vocabulary size. Also, they rarely have a complete understanding of what they have produced.

Regarding Montessori method, Teacher A further stated that: ... [students] participated in the activities without any force, I think they are more relaxed, they do not feel anxious or get bored... the significant positive effect of Montessori Method is enhancing learners' motivation.

Both teachers stated that knowing about autism spectrum disorder is the first step in teaching English to them. More specifically, familiarity with each autistic student's characteristics, interest, and disabilities is crucial for discovering the best possible way of teaching English language to them, and this also affects how to encourage them.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to compare the influence of Montessori-oriented and Audio-Lingual Method of English language teaching on English learning of students with autism. To this end, two sources (observation and teachers' interview) were used and the results indicated that both Montessori-Oriented and Audio Lingual Method could improve the students' English language productive skills; However, the Montessori-Oriented Method further contributed to enhancing teacher-student relationship, providing an environment for students with autism to work independently, move freely around the class and interact more with other students. Furthermore, Teacher B's lesson plan contained a huge amount of input, and repetition of simple sentences suggesting that she was aware of the fact that students with autism have difficulty in learning some aspects of language [4], and they can learn the best through repetition. Other researchers have also pointed to the importance of provision of sufficient amount of input for L2 language learning [12]-[13]. This is specifically vital in case of students with autism since they have concentration and verbal production problems [14].

In comparison with Teacher B, Teacher A used a variety of educational materials including songs, videos, flashcards, and pictures which were suitable for autistic students with various learning styles. In this line, [20] argues that among the learning styles, individuals with autism have kinesthetic, visual, and then auditory preferences for learning. Teacher A also believed that incorporating the Montessori Method to her classes enhanced her students' independence and motivation. It is notable that Montessori classes are characterized by improving independent learning in children by teachers' guidance [28]. One of the main Montessori-based techniques was the use of objects that attract students' attention. The use of lumpy objects and posters specifically contributed to enhance students' motivation of learning.

According to [22] because students are visual thinkers, inclusion of more visual clues can facilitate their L2 learning. The findings of this study may increase the awareness of teacher educators to plan teacher development programs for the teachers dealing with students with special needs using various alternatives for English language teaching methods such as Montessori which is developed based on the observations of children affected by mental deficiencies. More importantly, this study can raise the awareness of teachers about the educational alternatives which involves all senses of the students and thus suit the needs of many students, especially ones with autism. Furthermore, the sample of this study constitute students with mild to moderate autism, and the participated students aged 14-17 and the sample was limited to two educational centers. As a result, the student sample of current study can not be the representative of the population of autistic students. Therefore, future researchers can focus on different age of autistic students, more severe autism as well as taking into account the effects of various methods of English language teaching.

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