



PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES TO TEACH NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

ESTUDIANTE

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Pedagogical Strategies to Teach Neurodivergent Students in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

The term *neurodiversity* can be explained as the distinction to those people whose neurological characteristics are different from what is considered standard or typical. The purpose of the paper is to help teachers find ways to implement pedagogical strategies to teach Neurological students as well as Neurotypical students. The goal behind these strategies is to help create a safe and understanding environment inside the classroom for neurodivergent students. Also, implementing these practices aims to diminish the alienation of students with ADHD, Autism, dyslexia, etc. Even the smallest changes in the way you teach can impact the students' life for the better and make the difference between succeeding in learning a second language or giving up in the process entirely.

Keywords: English, neurodiversity, pedagogical, strategies, teaching.

Resumen

El término neurodiversidad puede ser explicado como la distinción que de aquellas personas cuyas características neurológicas son diferentes a lo que es considerado estándar o típico. El propósito de esta investigación es ayudar a las profesoras a implementar estrategias pedagógicas para enseñar a estudiantes neurotípicos y neurodiversos. El objetivo detrás del planteamiento de estas estrategias es el crear un ambiente

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seguro y de entendimiento dentro del salón de clases. Además, la implementación de estas prácticas tiene el propósito de disminuir la separación de los estudiantes con ADHD, autismo, dislexia, etc... Todo cambió hacia la forma en la que enseñamos por más pequeño que sea tiene el poder de afectar positivamente la vida de nuestros estudiante y crear una diferencia en su proceso de aprendizaje.

Palabras claves: enseñanza, estrategias, inglés, neurodiversidad, pedagógicas.

Introduction

Most teachers will agree that adapting the curriculum to the students' necessities is an important requirement to create an inclusive class. However, these changes can be difficult to implement when the teachers have not received proper training to adjust to the different neurodiversities that may be present in their classroom. To create real inclusiveness, we need to condition ourselves to be able to create new guidelines and solutions to handle situations that involve both neurotypical and neurodivergent students.

The first step we need to take is to familiarize ourselves with these two terms as they will appear multiple times in this paper. According to Jaarsma and Welin, "Neurodiversity has remained a controversial concept over the last decade. In its broadest sense the concept of neurodiversity regards atypical neurological development as a normal human difference" (p. 20). In other words, the term *neurodiversity* is used to distinguish those people whose neurological characteristics are different from what is considered standard or typical.

Based on my teaching experience and research, we often do not include Neurodiversity among the areas that need to be taken into account to create an inclusive classroom. According to Downing (2019),

Students with disabilities (SDs) are a rapidly growing population in our current school systems. While also being one myself, out of the 10 classes I have instructed 6 of them have had SDs. From personally experiencing a 60% chance of having SDs in the classroom, I have desperately sought to find new ways to construct my curriculum so that these students can be represented and supported within the classroom. (p. 3)

Even though this data was taken from a research paper made in regards to physical disabilities, this statement has validity with invisible diversity such as neurodiversity because it shows us that even when a large percentage of the population is neurodivergent, we might not be prepared to teach them. Practices as simple as the acknowledgement of neurodiversity in the classroom can create a safe and understanding environment to help the students feel more confident and motivated in their learning process. Nevertheless this is a bare minimum situation regarding inclusivity, which is why we should give the teachers enough resources to teach all of their students without splitting their classroom into the Neurotypical and the Neurodivergent students who have ADHD, Autism, dyslexia, etc. in order to diminish the alienation of students.

Turning Weaknesses into Strengths

The way in which we teach and the resources we implement in the classroom can impact the student's learning process for better or worse. Even the smallest change can make the difference between succeeding in learning a second language or giving up in the process entirely. One of the first pedagogical strategies that we can discuss is to change our perspective on neurodivergent people and the way they learn. Costa Rica's education system, like many others around the world, has aids to help students with neurodiversity such as special classrooms, teachers, and/or assistants. Downing (2019) explained this problem in his thesis when he wrote,

Even though disability is seen as "acceptable" in schools, institutions still maintain alienating instructional practices and mentalities. From my personal experience, teachers and classrooms are not always accepting to those with "disabilities." Rarely have I had a college class with a teacher that was willingly helpful and accommodating of my needs. (p. 3)

However, the system is, by default, designed to attend to the neurotypical students' needs instead of every student in the system, which is why we need to make changes to "adapt" to diverse ways of thinking instead of having a curriculum that works for everybody.

Even ourselves as teachers tend to underestimate these students and view their diversity as weaknesses instead of possible strengths to be implemented inside the learning process.

This can be a complicated transition especially because we have to unlearn years of stereotypes and assumptions made regarding these students. Nevertheless, as difficult as it might seem to work on this strategy, we cannot skip it as we need it as a foundation to build an inclusive classroom. According to Armstrong (2012), "Once we recognize the strengths of students with special needs, we can start to create positive environments within which they can thrive" (p. 11). A teacher's main goal should always be to ensure that our students are able to use their talents to learn inside the classroom in their own way. To accomplish this objective, it is necessary to switch our mentality of pushing our neurodivergent students "fit" inside of paradigms made for neurotypical students. Use their specific attitudes to improve their learning process instead of forcing them to change so we can teach them.

For example, autistic students (may vary regarding the case) have a higher affinity for visual and auditory rather than speech tasks. As said by Mottron (2011, p. 34),

These differences may also have downsides, such as difficulties with spoken language. But they can confer some advantages. A growing body of research is showing that autistics outperform neurologically typical children and adults in a wide range of perception tasks, such as spotting a pattern in a distracting environment.

Mottron's study (2011) wanted to show how autistic people can lack in some aspects such as speech, but their brain compensates in other areas so they can succeed. Moreover, she wanted to let us know that it is essential to distinguish that even though autistic students may be better in certain affinities, that does not mean they won't progress in other areas like their neurotypical classmates. Autistic students have other tools which is why they might not learn like the rest of their classmates, but that does not mean they would not achieve the same or higher results than a neurotypical student. Also, when we acknowledge this diversity and exploit it for the students' benefit, we can start seeing improvement in test results and class work.

Also, this new way of thinking might build the confidence and motivation in the

neurodivergent students because we will take the pressure out of trying to “be suited” for the standard norms. In this way, the students can implement this energy in using their talents to learn a second language in their individual ways. Even though using the students’ strengths has a lot of benefits, teachers need to be realistic regarding what we can include in the curriculum. By this statement, I do not mean that we should discourage students to pursue their passions or change who they are, but we have to be selective in what can actively assist in second language acquisition.

Why Does Representation Matter to Neurodivergent Students?

The next pedagogical strategy proposed in this paper is the use of positive neurodivergent representation inside the classroom. According to Gobbo et al. (2019),

From this perspective, autism, ADHD, LD, and other ways of being are natural, often valuable, and also linked with real challenges that deserve attention. The neurodiversity movement is made up of people who identify as neurodivergent telling their stories and advocating for social justice. (p .14)

Gobbo et al. (2019) expressed that promoting a good representation in your classroom is relevant because it helps neurodivergent students see their outstanding qualities in all kinds of media such as movies or TV shows. Furthermore, these practices will help neurotypical students to familiarize themselves with neurodiversity qualities and stop relying on stereotypes in order to try to understand the diversity around them. There are several ways in which teachers can include neurodiverse representation inside their English classes. For example, you can include authors in your literature classes, such as Octavia Butler who is dyslexic or Casey McQuiston who has ADHD. You can show series and movies, such as *A Nightmare Before Christmas* and *the Corpse's Bride* which were directed by Tim Burton who is on the Autistic Spectrum. You may use music to strengthen listening skills in your lessons from diverse singers, such as Billie Eilish who has Tourette's syndrome and who your students might already know.

Compliment the usage of these materials with a small introduction of the biography of

the author, directors, singers, etc... in order to show students how their neurodiversity did not stop them from reaching their goals. Also, allow neurodivergent students to share their opinions regarding the resources that will be included in the lessons to make sure that the representation will not do more harm than good. According to an article by Stansel (2020) in regards to the movie Music which is supposed to follow the life of an autistic child named Music. Nevertheless, both the director and the main actress who plays Music are neurotypical and refused to hear the extensive criticism from the neurodiverse community. Moreover, the director (Sia) actually went on to explain why her representation was right and the criticism was invalid. Stansel (2020) wrote,

Sia does have executive control over her movie. She got to make those harmful decisions but now, she doesn't get to tell the community who she claimed that she was trying to "lovingly represent" that they don't get to criticize her for her own choices. She made this situation for herself. The autistic and disabled community at large have a right to explain to her why her idea of a loving portrayal is so very, very harmful. (p. 2)

Stansel (2020) explains that hearing neurodiverse voices when creating diverse representation is very important not only to have an accurate portrait of neurodiverse people in media but also to not perpetuate harmful stereotypes. A good strategy to avoid this mistake in our classroom is to give your students a space to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable with regarding their diversity and the way the media portrays people like them. Sharing their perspective and bad experiences can help educate the class in what is disrespectful and inaccurate. Keep in mind that it is nobody's job to educate you, but a neurodivergent person can give you valuable opinions and critiques on what is being done in the classroom.

Also, during his research *Stigma: ignorance, prejudice or discrimination?* Thornicroft et al. (2007) explained the importance of talking and relating to neurodivergent people to get rid of the stigma because the majority of the subjects involved had a negative physical reaction when told to imagine meeting a neurodiverse person. Furthermore, they explained

that other papers written on the subject did not explain how to create more opportunities for the neurodiverse population but rather they talked about the negative attitude that justified the exclusion of neurodivergent people in the workplace. Thornicroft et al. (2007) concluded,

In sum, this means sharpening our focus upon human rights, upon injustice and discrimination as actually experienced by people with mental illness, and upon adding to our knowledge about interventions that society should undertake to reduce both stigmatisation and its consequences. (p. 193)

Furthermore, as a teacher, I have seen how ignorance can easily turn into hate or exclusion against the neurodivergent students inside the classroom. Censoring ourselves and our students regarding diversity will only make the students perceive the subject as taboo or shameful, which will only contribute to the stigma surrounding these diversities. Furthermore, this will teach the students how to advocate for themselves in the future. There are students who will remain quiet and try to mask their neurodivergency so they will not have to deal with “inconveniencing” their class or opening themselves to discrimination.

This abstinence from disclosing their necessities to the professor can harm the students’ learning and socialization process in the classroom. According to the study carried out by Geyer (2021) that focused on the ways in which university professors and staff need to adapt to the grown neurodivergent population in a higher education,

Most participants waited to disclose their ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) diagnosis until circumstances brought the issue to the surface. The participants tended to be guarded with their professors, typically revealing only as much information as necessary to receive specific accommodations. (p. 17)

Geyer (2021) wanted to highlight how hesitant neurodiverse students are to share their necessities with the professors as they feared they might be discriminated against or dismissed. Particularly, I have suffered from chronic depression and generalized anxiety disorder since I was 10 years old; when I was in school, my panic attacks were perceived as being spoiled and rude. This bad experience is the reason why I kept my neurodiversity hidden throughout high school and college. Nevertheless, during my second year at the

university, I had to change my medication which caused me to be sick for about two weeks. I went to classes anyway because I had exams that day but had to leave in the middle of the lesson due to severe panic attacks. It was not until then that I decided to communicate what was happening because I could not afford to lose that evaluation. Thankfully, my professor was kind enough to allow me to take it when I was feeling better. I made the decision to advocate for myself, but not all the students make this decision, nor do all professors are as understanding.

Do not be shy when sharing all the necessary information with your students, but make sure to not put your neurodivergent students in the spotlight as an example. Not every student is as open about their diversity as others. It is not our place to push our students to be the center of attention as it can make them react in a negative way such as a meltdown or a panic attack. We should not force neurodivergent students into awkward situations just for our gain and growth. The most essential part of this pedagogical strategy is to raise awareness and build confidence toward the neurodiverse students inside and outside the classroom.

Classroom Accommodations

Last but not least, we can explore how to include sensory-based accommodations in the classroom for the neurodivergent students. Anderson (2016) explained that “Through the addition of classroom sensory-based movement activities, that offer alerting and calming input, OT (Occupational therapists) strategies have the potential to benefit not only identified students, but also the whole class” (p. 4). Anderson (2016) expresses that some neurodivergent students need additional materials to keep themselves calm and focused on the lessons. Allowing or providing active breaks or silence zones in our classroom can have a positive impact on the students’ learning process because it allows them to soothe themselves if they feel overstimulated with the class work. If it is not possible to stop the class to allow these time-outs; just positioning the neurodivergent students’ seats next to the exits can give students the freedom to leave the classroom if necessary to collect

themselves with more privacy. As a teacher, I believe that it is preferable to have students absent for a couple of minutes than to quit the lessons entirely because they are too much for them to handle.

Also, as teachers we might have been taught to object to the usage of toys or cellphones during class with reason. However, certain resources, if used appropriately, can make students focus on the lesson instead of becoming distracted by them. According to Biel (2017),

Correctly used, such items enable students to manage sensory issues, anxiety, and attention challenges by redirecting their physical and emotional energy into an object. This lets them remain calm and tuned in and able to listen to the teacher, read in a more focused way, and participate more productively. (p. 12)

Biel (2017) explained that fidget toys or interactive apps can help concentrate the students' energy, which will allow them to focus on the lessons. These kinds of "focus tools," as described by Biel (2017), are especially helpful with students with anxiety and ADHD. Having a couple of squishies, fidget spinners, pop-it fidget toys, etc... stored in your classroom for public use can be a viable aid for some neurodivergent students who might be struggling to pay attention and follow the lessons. Due to the national emergency and sanitary reasons, sharing these toys among the students might not be possible, but we can adapt the strategy to have the students bring their own toys without sharing or disinfecting the toys as frequently as possible.

I am conscious that a school does not have a budget for this kind of resources as part of classroom materials, and I cannot expect teachers to buy them out of their own pocket, which is why you can search for alternatives to get focus tools in your classroom, such as asking the students to bring toy donations or using YouTube videos to make your own fidget toys. It is understandable that other teachers might be hesitant to allow students to have these focus tools during their lessons due but we need to look for ways to make them become acceptable for all the students. We need to consider sharing the reason behind the use of these focus tools inside the classroom with our colleagues to avoid their

misuse or prohibition of them during other lessons as they might be perceived as distractions instead of an aid. Teach your fellow teachers and students how and when to use these focus tools to take advantage of them instead of getting distracted. It might not be an easy task to convince other teachers to include this pedagogical strategy because they might still perceive them as toys that do not belong in the classroom.

A good way to convince them is to use yourself as an example, experiment in your own lessons and see the benefits that the focus tool brings to the students. Furthermore, explain the negative alternative to stimming when neurodivergent students do not count with their fidget toys. According to Kapp et al. (2019), some autistic people are prone to stimming to relieve stress when they feel overwhelmed in ways that can be harmful, he explained:

Stimming was identified as a repetitive, usually rhythmic behaviour that was commonly expressed through body movements (variously described as hand flapping, finger flicking, hair pulling or pinching, feet flexing, spinning, necklace playing) but also vocalisations (e.g. muttering, grunting, stuttering, whistling, singing). (p. 1785)

Kapp et al. (2019) explained that stimming is not bad, nor should it be shameful, but in a classroom environment, it might be damaging for their learning process. This is the reason why fidgeting can be a good stimming alternative, especially in a closed setting such as a classroom.

Conclusions

As mentioned previously, teachers will often agree that adapting our curriculum to fit all of the students' necessities is an important requirement to create an inclusive classroom. Nevertheless, we do not always know how or what needs to be changed to improve our teaching. As teachers, we will encounter a great variety of types of diversity in our student body, but in this paper, the focus was on neurodiversity. I decided to choose this topic because during my practice, I have encountered a large population of neurodivergent students both diagnosed and undiagnosed with one or several disorders. The pedagogical

strategies proposed in this paper include changes that can be implemented in order to create an inclusive classroom for both our neurodivergent and neurotypical students. This paper tried to propose both large and small changes to encourage teachers to do as much or as little as can realistically be done inside each individual classroom.

Throughout this paper, we explored how the way we teach our lessons can have an impact on the student's learning process for better or worse. The first pedagogical strategy that we discussed is to teach ourselves to change our perspective on neurodivergent people and the way they learn. It is necessary to approach neurodivergent students with their strengths in mind instead of all the possible difficulties we might encounter when teaching them. Do not see neurodiversity as a characteristic that needs to be overcome but rather use their diverse way of thought to improve their learning. Finally, keep in mind that just because neurodiverse students might have more talent for a skill such as listening, just means that they might need more practice with the rest of the skills so they can ace it as well.

Furthermore, we studied how simple practices such as talking about neurodiversity inside the classroom can promote a safe environment to help the neurodivergent students feel more confident and neurotypical students be more understanding. Let your neurodivergent students be a guide to differentiating between what is good and bad representation in the media. Help them have a safe space where they are able to share their experiences and the way they feel. Including positive diverse representation in your materials can help get rid of the stigma surrounding neurodiversity in your classroom. Moreover, showing these outstanding people to your students will highlight to the students that neurodiversity will not be an obstacle in the way to their goals and dreams.

Lastly, the final pedagogical strategy proposed was to include sensory-based accommodations in the classroom for the neurodivergent students. Based on the research conducted by Anderson (2016) and Biel (2017), some neurodivergent students need additional materials or accommodations to remain calm and focused during lessons. Making activities such as active breaks or silence zones to section our lesson plan can have a positive impact on the students' learning process. These practices allow the students to have

a moment to soothe themselves when they feel overstimulated. Also, if you cannot include pauses during your class, you can position the neurodivergent students' seats next to the exits so they can leave when necessary or provide focus tools that can channel this energy into a more productive activity.

Recommendations

1. Educate yourselves as much as possible in regards to neurodiversity. Use the resources that are at your disposal such as articles and books written by neurodivergent authors. This will give you an insight of how and when you need to make changes to the curriculum to benefit all of the students in your classroom.
2. Have an open dialogue with your students regarding diversity. This will improve the neurotypical students' perception of neurodiversity as well as teach the neurodivergent students that diversity is not a taboo or shameful topic.
3. Create a bond of trust with all your students so they can feel comfortable telling you what they need inside the classroom to improve their learning experience. Show them that you are not going to share their private matters unless they allow it.
4. Do not belittle or mock the students' emotions and fears. Talk to them and their parents to work toward a calm environment for all the students.
5. Teach neurotypical students to be respectful and understanding of diversity. Correct rude attitudes and comments directed toward neurodivergent students.
6. Try to adapt your curriculum without having to alienate the neurodivergent students from the rest of the class.

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DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, Masiel Pereira Chaves, cédula de identidad 116900638, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de la responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado "**Pedagogical Strategies to Teach Neurodivergent Students in the English Language Classroom**" , para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en enseñanza del Inglés.



Firma

Heredia, a los 04 días del mes de setiembre del año 2021.

Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación de la estudiante Masiel Pereira Chaves, cédula 1 1690 0638, que lleva como título **Pedagogical Strategies to Teach Neurodivergent Students in the English Language Classroom**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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