DOI 10.70286/EOSS-20.07.2026.028.327-334

TEACHING ENGLISH ONLINE TO AN ADOLESCENT LEARNER WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: A THREE-YEAR CASE STUDY

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Abstract. This case study investigates pedagogical challenges and effective instructional strategies in online English language teaching for an adolescent learner with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Over a three-year period (2023–2026), the participant attended regular online EFL lessons delivered via Zoom and Google Meet. Classroom observations and reflective teaching records were analyzed to identify recurring learning barriers and evaluate instructional adaptations. The findings indicate that structured routines, indirect questioning, positive reinforcement, segmented multimedia input, and individualized feedback contributed to increased learner engagement and reduced anxiety. Although limited to a single case, the study offers practical recommendations for teachers working with neurodivergent learners in online language education.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, online English language teaching, inclusive education, EFL, neurodiversity, case study, instructional adaptations, online tutoring.

Introduction. The rapid expansion of online language education has increased the need for evidence-based instructional approaches for neurodivergent learners. Previous studies have explored English language teaching for autistic learners in inclusive classrooms (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017) and online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Giraldo Martínez & Ramos Carvajal, 2021). However, relatively little research has examined long-term individualized one-to-one online English language instruction for autistic adolescents or documented both behavioural and language development over an extended period. The present longitudinal case study contributes to this area of research by examining individualized online EFL instruction over a three-year period.

The purpose and the objectives. The study aims to identify the key challenges experienced by an adolescent learner with ASD in an online English language learning context and to examine the effectiveness of instructional adaptations that supported learner engagement, communication, and language development during a three-year intervention.

Methodology. This study employed a longitudinal mixed-methods single-case design combining qualitative classroom observations with quantitative measures of English language development to examine the effectiveness of individualized instructional strategies in online English language teaching for an adolescent learner diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The participant was a 13-year-old Ukrainian adolescent diagnosed ASD who had relocated to the United States as a refugee. At the beginning of the intervention, the learner demonstrated an English language proficiency of approximately CEFR level A2 and attended a mainstream American school. The intervention continued over three years, during which the learner progressed to approximately CEFR level B2 while remaining enrolled in general education.

The participant was selected because he received continuous one-to-one online English instruction over an extended period, which provided a unique opportunity to examine long-term individualized pedagogical adaptations in an authentic educational setting. Written consent for research participation was obtained from the learner's family, and all personally identifiable information was removed or anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

The intervention consisted of two individual 50-minute online English lessons per week conducted via Zoom and Google Meet over a three-year period (2023–2026). Lessons followed a relatively consistent instructional structure, including a speaking warm-up, homework review with teacher feedback, explicit grammar instruction supported by online practice tests, and vocabulary development through reading and listening activities.

Approximately 300 online lessons (over 250 hours of instruction) formed the basis of the present analysis. The learner's progress was evaluated through repeated observations of several pedagogically relevant indicators, including:

- length and complexity of spoken responses;
- length and grammatical complexity of written production;
- sustained attention during instructional activities;
- frequency of self-soothing behaviours (e.g., fidgeting, repetitive hand movements, rocking, and spontaneous vocalizations);
- willingness to maintain eye contact during interaction;
- emotional responses to corrective feedback;
- confidence, self-regulation, and overall classroom engagement.

Quantitative data were collected through regular English language assessments administered via the Test-English platform, including grammar, vocabulary, reading, listening, use of English, and writing tasks. Speaking proficiency was assessed continuously using CEFR-informed criteria based on fluency, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and lexical resource. The learner's overall language development was additionally monitored through annual English proficiency assessments conducted at his American school, which provided independent evidence of sustained language progress throughout the three-year intervention. The combined assessment data indicated an improvement from approximately CEFR level A2 to B2.

The observational data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring behavioural patterns, instructional challenges, and effective teaching strategies across the three-year intervention. Due to the single-participant design, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all learners with ASD; rather, they aim to provide pedagogically relevant insights and practical recommendations for English language teachers working with neurodivergent learners in online educational contexts.

Research results. The encountered challenges and strategies for working with students with ASD teaching a foreign language are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Instructional challenges, teaching adaptations, and observed outcomes in online ESL instruction for an adolescent learner with ASD

Observed challenge	**Instructional adaptation**	**Observed outcome**
Avoidance of direct eye contact during interaction	Rather than insisting on eye contact, the tutor maintained a relaxed visual presence and occasionally looked away to reduce social pressure. The learner's attention was gently redirected by name when necessary.	The learner gradually became more comfortable maintaining eye contact during interaction. By the end of the observation period, he was able to maintain visual engagement throughout most conversations while only occasionally looking away.
Frequent self-regulatory sensory behaviours (fidgeting) during lessons	Self-regulatory behaviours were accepted unless they disrupted participation. Gentle auditory cues (soft finger clicks) and brief movement breaks were incorporated to redirect attention without discouraging self-regulation.	Most repetitive behaviours became substantially less frequent over time. The learner appeared calmer during lessons and usually required only occasional self-regulatory movements while remaining engaged in learning activities.
Limited verbal elaboration and difficulty expressing personal thoughts	Indirect questioning techniques and open-ended prompts were used, often encouraging responses from the perspective of family members or familiar situations.	Spoken production gradually expanded from isolated words and yes/no responses to longer, grammatically more complex utterances, particularly when discussing topics of personal interest.
Difficulty sustaining attention during discussions and oral tasks	The tutor combined verbal cues, visual supports, gamified activities, role-play dialogues, and regular changes in task format to sustain engagement.	Sustained attention increased considerably. The learner progressed from losing focus within approximately 30 seconds during conversations to maintaining meaningful participation for 5–10 minutes, while remaining engaged in structured activities for 10–20 minutes before requiring a change of activity.

Continuation of table 1

Observed challenge	**Instructional adaptation**	**Observed outcome**
Limited written production and reduced elaboration	Writing tasks were scaffolded through explicit structural guidelines, expected length, and formatting requirements	Written responses became more organized and followed conventional formatting. Although elaboration remained limited, the learner showed greater consistency in producing appropriately structured written work
Strong reliance on positive reinforcement for motivation	Frequent positive reinforcement was provided following successful task completion and communicative attempts.	Positive feedback consistently increased the learner's willingness to participate, attempt challenging tasks, and communicate more confidently during lessons.
Increased emotional sensitivity to corrective feedback	Corrective feedback is given in an indirect, collaborative way, focusing on solving problems together, and is followed by positive praise to keep motivation high and maintain a supportive learning atmosphere.	Emotional reactions to mistakes became noticeably less intense. While the learner continued apologizing after errors, these responses gradually resembled polite conversational behaviour rather than signs of distress.
Perfectionism and reluctance to continue after making mistakes	Multiple attempts were permitted, emphasizing learning through repetition rather than immediate accuracy.	The learner became increasingly willing to continue activities despite mistakes and gradually developed self-reassuring statements (e.g., *"It's okay, we still did well."*), indicating improved emotional self-regulation.
Difficulty comprehending extended video materials	Longer videos were divided into short segments (30–60 seconds), each followed by immediate comprehension questions and discussion supported by visual cues.	The learner demonstrated improved recall of content, produced more detailed summaries, and expressed personal opinions when working with shorter video segments.
Anxiety associated with schedule changes	Lessons followed a highly predictable routine, and unavoidable changes were introduced gradually with advance explanation.	The learner no longer joined lessons excessively early (40–50 minutes beforehand), typically connecting only 5–10 minutes before the lesson. Although changes in routine still caused some anxiety, anticipatory stress became less pronounced.

* the data were compiled by the author

The observed outcomes presented in Table 1 emerged gradually throughout the three-year intervention and represent qualitative changes documented through repeated classroom observations.

Table 2. Longitudinal changes in learner performance across the three-year intervention

Domain	**Baseline**	**Final outcome**	**Assessment source**
English proficiency	A2	B2	Test-English; annual school assessments
Speaking	One-word responses	Extended responses	CEFR-informed tutor assessment
Writing	Minimal texts	Structured texts	Writing tasks
Attention	30 s	5–10 min	Classroom observations
Self-regulation	Frequent	Occasional	Weekly teaching journals
Eye contact	Avoided	Maintained	Classroom observations
Emotional regulation	High anxiety	Improved	Classroom observations
Motivation	Low confidence	Greater communicative confidence	Classroom observations

* the data were compiled by the author

The improvements summarized in Table 2 likely reflect the combined influence of individualized instruction, the learner's natural maturation, continued exposure to English at school, and family support. Nevertheless, the consistency of the instructional approach across approximately 300 lessons suggests that the pedagogical adaptations described in this study contributed meaningfully to the learner's progress.

Discussion. The findings can be interpreted from both neurodiversity and second language acquisition perspectives. Consistent with previous research, the learner demonstrated differences in social communication, behavioural flexibility, and emotional regulation that are commonly associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Faras et al., 2010). The learner in the present case demonstrated several characteristics frequently described in the literature, including reduced eye contact, limited verbal elaboration, a strong preference for routine, and heightened anxiety during communicative tasks (Mesibov et al., 2004; Petersson-Bloom, 2022). However, the present longitudinal case study suggests that consistently implemented individualized pedagogical adaptations may support meaningful improvements in learner engagement, communication, and English language development. Similarly, Padmadewi (2017) reported that individualized instructional strategies and positive teacher support facilitate engagement and participation among learners with ASD.

Successful foreign language learning requires learners to communicate, take risks, and accept mistakes (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). These expectations may present particular challenges for autistic learners, who often experience increased anxiety in communicative situations and may be reluctant to engage in spontaneous interaction (Genovese & Butler, 2023). In the present case, reducing communicative pressure, respecting the learner's communication preferences, and establishing a supportive teacher-learner relationship appeared to facilitate greater participation, confidence, and willingness to communicate over time.

Communication and Social Interaction. Rather than encouraging the learner to adopt neurotypical patterns of communication, the instructional adaptations focused on creating conditions in which communication could develop naturally and comfortably. This approach is consistent with the "double empathy problem" proposed by Milton (2012), which suggests that communication difficulties arise from mutual differences in understanding between autistic and non-autistic individuals rather than solely from deficits in the autistic person. This interpretation is further supported by compassionate pedagogical approaches, which emphasize that pressuring autistic learners to suppress or mask autistic traits, such as avoiding self-regulatory behaviours or forcing eye contact, may increase stress and negatively affect psychological well-being (Hamilton et al., 2023). The present findings support this perspective. As the learner experienced less social pressure and greater acceptance of his communication preferences, he gradually became more willing to maintain eye contact, provide longer responses, and participate more actively.

Attention and Self-Regulation. Initially, the learner displayed frequent fidgeting behaviours, including repetitive movements, hair pulling, nail biting, and object manipulation. Instead of treating these behaviours as disruptive, they were interpreted as signs of increasing emotional tension and addressed through gentle auditory cues, brief movement breaks, and controlled self-regulation activities. Over time, the frequency of self-regulatory behaviours decreased, while the learner became calmer and more attentive during lessons. Likewise, Kapp et al. (2019) argue that stimming often serves important sensory and emotional self-regulatory functions for autistic individuals.

Emotional Regulation and Motivation. The findings suggest that emotional safety played a key role in the learner's language development. Initially, mistakes frequently triggered anxiety, repeated apologies, and reluctance to continue communicative tasks. However, collaborative feedback, positive reinforcement, and treating errors as a natural part of learning gradually increased the learner's confidence and willingness to communicate (although occasional anxiety remained evident). These findings are consistent with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that anxiety may hinder second language acquisition, and with Dörnyei's (2001) view that supportive teacher feedback and a positive classroom climate enhance learner motivation and willingness to communicate.

Implications for Online ESL Teaching. The present case study highlights several practical implications for teachers working with autistic learners in one-to-one online English language instruction. Rather than attempting to modify autistic behaviours to fit conventional classroom expectations, teachers may benefit from

adapting instructional practices to the learner's individual communication style, sensory needs, and emotional regulation strategies. Such an approach appears to promote learner engagement while reducing unnecessary stress.

The findings also suggest that predictable lesson routines, individualized feedback, flexible task design, and multimodal learning materials can support both language development and classroom participation. In addition, creating a psychologically safe learning environment in which mistakes are treated as a natural part of language learning may encourage autistic learners to communicate more confidently and participate more actively in communicative tasks.

Limitations. The study is limited by its single-case design and the absence of standardized behavioural assessment instruments. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than representative of all autistic learners.

Conclusion. The findings of the present case study suggest that effective online English language instruction for autistic learners depends not only on appropriate teaching methods but also on adapting the learning environment to the learner's individual communication style, sensory needs, and emotional well-being. Throughout the three-year intervention, individualized instructional adaptations, including predictable lesson routines, supportive feedback, flexible communication strategies, and acceptance of self-regulatory behaviours, were associated with improvements in learner engagement, confidence, and English language proficiency. The learner progressed from approximately CEFR level A2 to B2 while demonstrating greater communicative participation, improved emotional self-regulation, and increased willingness to use English during online interaction.

Although the findings are based on a single learner and should not be generalized to all autistic students, they demonstrate how long-term individualized online instruction can contribute to meaningful improvements in both communicative competence and learner confidence. Future research involving larger samples is needed to determine which instructional adaptations are most effective across different autistic learner profiles.

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TƏDRİS PROSESİNDƏ MÜASİR TƏLİM TEXNOLOGİYALARININ İMKANLARI

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Xülasə

Müasir dövrdə təhsil sisteminin yenilənməsi, təlim prosesinin məzmun və metodoloji cəhətdən təkmilləşdirilməsini tələb edir. Bu yenilənmənin mərkəzində təhsilalanların idrak fəallığını stimullaşdıran, müstəqil öyrənmə bacarıqlarını formalaşdıran və tədrisin keyfiyyətini yüksəldən müasir təlim texnologiyaları dayanır. Tədqiq olunan yanaşmalar tədris prosesinin səmərəliliyini artırmaqla yanaşı, sinifdə əməkdaşlıq mühitini gücləndirir və şagirdi passiv qəbuledici mövqeyindən yaradıcı, tədqiqatçı iştirakçı mövqeyinə yüksəldir. İKT-nin tətbiqi, xüsusilə interaktiv lövhələr,