

# **Equitable Education for Bilingual Autism Spectrum Disorder Children**

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Abstract. Inclusive and equitable quality education as the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations 2030 agenda is needed to provide education for all. All children, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), have the right to get equal access and quality in learning with their peers in mainstream school. Their difficulty in social interaction and communication does not prevent them from acquiring and learning more than one language and becoming bilinguals. Bilingual children with or without autism spectrum disorder benefit from cognitive development, language skills, and executive function. Therefore, support from teachers and people in the environment to help them develop their second language with equality and equity is required as the prevalence of ASD children is increasing. This paper explores the importance of equitable education for bilingual children with autism spectrum disorder. It emphasizes what the English teacher should prepare to provide ASD students with an equitable education.

**Keywords:** equitable education · bilingual · autism spectrum disorder children

#### 1 Introduction

One of the most apparent manifestations of the general commitment to leave no one behind stated in the United Nations (UN) 2030 agenda, is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all [1]. The notion of education inclusively at all levels has been proposed by the international community in Salamanca Statement [2], Dakar Framework for Action [3], and Incheon Declaration about Education 2030 [4]. The worldwide national agency for education set up a law to accommodate the notion since it is necessary for the education of all students across the country to be fair and equitable. The agency is aware that all students, including those with special needs, have the right to study in mainstream schools. However, they require some exceptions as equality and equity.

Making a distinction between equality and equity, two regularly conflated words, is necessary to define equitable education. Representation in typical cartoon illustrations is misleading. The equality panel shows children of varying heights standing on identical-sized boxes and attempting to write on a chalkboard. The tallest child can write comfortably, but the shortest child may struggle. The equity panel shows that all children

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have enough room to write while standing on various-sized boxes. Actually, both panels represent equality. Equality of inputs in the first panel, all children are given same-sized boxes, and equality of outcomes in the second panel, all children can write comfortably. The state of affairs (what) in the input or output is considered as equality. Meanwhile, the action and the process (how) to ensure equality is equity [1].

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have the right to have inclusive and equitable education. They have the right to learn together, get similar input or receive similar output to their typical development peers in regular schools. They have the right to be bilingual children and acquire their second or third language. They have the right to get equal access to and equal quality of learning with school support when facing challenges. Not only from teachers and other school members, but support is also needed from parents, therapists and the community. The increasing number of children with autism, one in 100 children [5], requires people have more knowledge about autism, especially about their strengths and weaknesses [6], to support their lifelong learning opportunities. The prevalence of ASD is rising and is frequently thought to call for special schooling methods and environments.

In education setting, teachers have challenges in teaching speakers with autism spectrum disorder. Teachers generally support the inclusion of students with special needs in their classroom, however, many of them lack the assurance and expertise to help students who are autistic [7], inexperienced, and lack formal education in working with ASD students [8]. Teachers are required to have good understanding about how ASD students acquire and learn their language, what the best instruction to teach second language, and how help them develop their language as bilingual [9]. Hence, educators must learn more about it and be prepared with methods for successfully teaching students. The teachers should modify their instruction to meet ASD needs in inclusive environments [10]. This paper explores the importance of equitable education for children with an autism spectrum disorder. It emphasizes the preparation of English language teachers performs equitable education for bilingual ASD children.

## 2 Bilingual Children with ASD

Children with autism spectrum disorder, who have difficulty in social interaction and verbal and non-verbal communication [11], have the same learning opportunity as other students to learn a second language [12] and become bilinguals. The second language is learned after acquiring their first language, mostly from mother-child interaction [13] or family and people around them [14]. Being bilingual has been proven to be advantageous and to have a positive impact in earlier studies on cognitive control [15]. Children with autism and those without the condition can both benefit from bilingualism. The available literature indicates that exposure to two languages does not impair cognitive development [16].

English as a language offers distinctive circumstances for second language learners in school. Through a range of teaching methods, including positive reinforcement, the least restrictive setting, intrinsic rewards, and whole-class instruction, students can be considerably helped in learning a new language. In addition, since learning a second language has been shown in recent studies to increase critical thinking, speech, reading,

writing significantly, and executive functions in individuals with autism spectrum disorders and developmental impairments, such instructional techniques are crucial for both special education students and students who are learning English [17].

Additionally, learning two languages may aid in the lifelong development of the brain and cognitive reserve. Last but not least, it implies that being bilingual is a significant social, educational, and personal element that may prevent cognitive deterioration as people age [18]. Recent research examining how bilingualism impacts cognitive and language processing throughout life has multiplied dramatically [19]. A language control system or cognitive/executive control is necessary for bilingual children to use the target language correctly [20]; therefore, they can process the information and act, such as switching attention [15] or using appropriate articles [21].

Some children may have different language exposure [22] and initial age of exposure that make them become simultaneous or sequential bilinguals. For example, children who are simultaneously exposed to two languages from birth and use both languages in any situation with their parents, friends and people in their environment are called simultaneous bilingual children [23]. Meanwhile, Those who acquire the first language at home and learn the second language later after learning the first language well are considered sequential bilingual children [24].

The typical development children generally have a universal language [25]. Children learn languages similarly [26]. They may say their first word around their first birthday and produce phrases and short sentences by their second birthday. Bilingual typical children may reach the same milestone but only one language they prefer to use [25] based on the language exposure [27]. Children prefer to use their first language. In bilingual children, the first language is still their focus, and second language proficiency is mainly predicated on first language ability [28].

On the other hand, children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) do not meet the milestones. Most ASD children have language difficulties, ranging from total speech impediment to language delays, trouble interpreting speech, echoing speech, or too formal or literal language. Even if they have acceptable formal language skills (such as vocabulary and grammar), autistic children find it difficult [11]. Moreover, they have a problem processing figurative language [29] and have trouble fluency in reading and comprehending the reading text [30]. Many children with autism spectrum disorder do not only have a language disorder, but also executive functioning problems [28], such as switching, inhibiting, and monitoring [29], and intelligence problems. Being labelled with the intellectually disabled term may limit ASD students' potential that surpasses academic standards [17]. In addition, the differences had by ASD children often draw other people's attention and may make them victims of bullying. They may have verbal, physical, or psychological bullying [31]. Educational activities for the entire school community are required to stop bullying and advance the successful inclusion of students with ASD [32].

## 3 Teachers Promote Equitable Education for ASD Students

To promote equitable education for students with autism spectrum disorder, teachers should prepare similar input for ASD students and their typical development peers or

prepare them to have similar outcomes by using differentiated instruction and media. Teachers cooperating with school members, parents, and people in the environment can support ASD students in facing their challenges by establishing an autism-friendly environment at school [8] to avoid bullying. Teachers should actively prepare a classroom with the idea of equity, focusing on giving each student the resources they need to succeed and establishing an extensive English language program for speech therapy and interpersonal social objectives. As far as classroom integration is concerned, this presents a particular circumstance. Depending on their academic range, much work may be required to modify a student's behaviour [17].

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting students with autism spectrum disorders. When working with autistic children in a regular classroom, they should consider the demands of the student's cognitive abilities, socioemotional needs, and social support systems [9]. In addition, they should improve students' deictic verbs by receiving intense training to look in the right direction [33]. Teachers should also have the self-efficacy, techniques, knowledge, attitudes, and confidence to deal with the difficulties and aid students in understanding stigma [7, 34, 35]. The most significant concepts held by teachers concerning autism, such as social difficulties and narrow or fixed interests, demonstrated that they were aware of the main symptoms [36].

Children with autism spectrum disorder who have difficulty living in a bilingual world [12] require equitable education to learn a second language and become bilinguals. English teachers need to understand how ASD children process words to make the best decisions helping them develop their language [37]. The teacher should expose them to English sounds, phrases, sentences, and other linguistic inputs. Highly exposure to English as the target language can maximize their performance in communicative skills [38]. It becomes a challenge for teachers of English because ASD students' ability for social interaction is affected by their neuropsychiatric disability. Students with autism spectrum disorders who take part in English classes might have a chance to socialize with their classmates. According to research, the more social chances special needs students have, the more they connect, and the more they will learn about social cues, interpersonal dynamics, expectations, and the knowledge they need to communicate with peers and teachers inside and outside the classroom. More opportunities to practice their social skills can positively affect them, their teachers, their families, and their communities [17].

Working with other students in a group is crucial and must be carried out with all the diversity since acceptance is necessary for inclusion and acknowledging each other's strengths helps learners function jointly [10]. Furthermore, accepting the different attractive presence of students with autism spectrum disorder in the school environment, in the educational process, inviting them to participate in group discussions, not bullying them, and acting lovingly toward them can help them stop bullying [31].

Early exposure to bilingual material in the classroom, such as English, might result in a system of education being "Englishized" [39]. There appears to be a wide range in how schools support students with autism. It might be because no single treatment is regarded as the most effective for autism. Finding a single effective treatment for everyone is extremely difficult because autism is a spectrum disorder with varying degrees of

severity. The Individual Education Plan (IEP), for instance, is useful because it incorporates visual aids, co-teaching, customized education, and a "buddy program" [40]. Differentiated instruction is a way to ensure that all students learn effectively and equally have opportunities for education. Teachers may let students choose their preferred learning method and involve them in lesson planning. This method works because giving the children with ASD a choice of activity does not result in a different outcome than the teacher's intended; instead, through many methods that each learner finds comfortable, the exercise can be done to achieve the desired outcome [10].

Since most children with ASD are visual learners who understand communication better with visual support, English teachers should prepare visual English teaching media, such as pictures, posters, videos, and others. In addition to helping students with ASD, using visual support as a teaching aids benefits other students who have typical development [10]. Teachers can use physical cards in the traditional Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) method and serve as the foundation for the learning of verbal and social skills [41].

Teachers must prepare interventions to support or replace what their ASD students want to write or say and to ease non-verbal ASD students' communication without words [42]. They can use gestures, symbols, pictograms, photos, images, word boards, books, and voice output communication aids [43]. In implementing the intervention, namely Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) intervention, teachers should consider the children's mental and physical condition [44, 45]. Choosing the most appropriate intervention and AAC device is crucial to support the children's strengths and reduce their weaknesses [6]. Children with ASD can become independent using mobile devices because they can utilize the program without help [41]. Furthermore, having an early and biologically based marker is recommended to help guide the treatment and therapy they need and the time to start the intervention [46]. Those with ASD who receive therapy early on in childhood are more likely to have independent lives as adults [41].

### 4 Conclusion

Providing equitable education for all children, including children with autism spectrum disorder, is the notion of the international community worldwide. Children with autism spectrum disorder who struggle with social interaction and communication need to be given equal input or output in learning their second language, in this case, English. To support equitable education, English teachers need to know more about autism spectrum disorder, their strengths and weaknesses, and how to help them develop their English language. To rich the implication of bilingual education for autism spectrum disorder children in Indonesian context, English teachers in Indonesia need to promote equitable education by implementing differentiated instruction, using visual aids, creating an autism-friendly school environment, considering the needs of every student, giving appropriate resources to meet each student's needs, and particular intervention.

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