Implementing Visual Strategies in L2 Acquisition Process for English as a Foreign Language Autistic Elementary Learners: Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract

Language, the vary mode of communication, has been very necessary for the varied classes and occupations. Visual strategies help the teachers enormously assist the special need especially the autistic children. Second language acquisition jeopardizes because of their eye contact problem and no social activities. In Bangladesh, autistic centers are working vigorously with a view to making them vocal and agreeable. By this time, it is visible in the various educational policies and programs that visual aids make a tremendous success to autistic learners. However, in Bangladesh, the ratio of autistic learners shifting to the normal school is very few. This notion is going to be changed day by day because of parental consciousness, national campaigns, and institutional advanced logistic supports and teachers’ training as well. The objective of this research is to trace out the current scenario of autistic learners’ ratio of reaction to the visual strategies. It is an empirical research depicting the English as a foreign language special need children’s L2 acquisition in Bangladesh which undoubtedly needs to be improved to achieve success in their future academic and physiological life.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition; English as a Foreign Language Learners; Autism and Visual Strategies; Special Children

1. Introduction

Communication plays a very vivid role in this civilized society. Talking or listening is not only means of communication, but also rather we may communicate through reading, writing, gesturing, drawing or even we may communicate by seeing, and feeling, or smelling. These all are the means of communication. These are the outcome at most of our conscious moments. Our success and well-being in civilized society greatly depend on these. In this regard, Herbert Simon says that without communication there can be no organization, for there is no possibility then of the group influencing the behavior of the individual. A child’s linguistic development generally covers three periods reflexive or screaming times, crowing or babbling time, and the talking time.

The process of L2 acquisition has long been of interest to scholars in many fields. Retarded children encounter exceptional difficulty participating in their communication. People who experience autism or listening shortcoming patient can’t show their emotions, desires, likings, disliking, etc. Visual strategies are those that may accelerate the ways of communication. Visual supports such as body language, natural environmental cues, traditional tools for organization, and specially designed tools to meet specific needs may aid them to overcome this drawback.
The usefulness of visual communication strategies to attain L2 acquisition for English as a foreign language (EFL) autistic learners is many. The function of visual communication strategies acknowledges the strength and more proficient skill areas of many students and develops aids to assist them in using their stronger skills to overcome their difficulty. People who experience language disorder, autism, aphasia, attention deficit disorder, behavior disorder, mental impairment, and traumatic brain injury can’t explain their perceptual reactions to the world. The term visual reminds us of pictures, but visual includes anything one sees. However, these things will not be valuable unless their meaning is perceived by the learners. Here product oriented syllabus which emphasizes on class lecture is important.

L2 acquisition for a child refers to the process through which a child acquires one or more second or foreign languages. Learners’ first language plays a great role in L2 acquisition. Contrastive analysis shows that when the rules of L1 differ from the rules of L2, errors are likely to occur. L1 interferes with L2 of a learner. In Bangla, “s or es” is not used with a verb in the simple present but in English it does. In English, the structure is subject + verb + object but in Bangla, subject + object + verb. For L1 and L2, the context in which the teaching takes place is very different requiring different material, syllabus and pedagogy. In EFL setting, there is limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Teachers are non-native speakers of English who lack opportunities to use language or may lack confidence in using it. Through the monitor model theory and neurofunctional theory, we can understand how the autistic children acquire the target language. The monitor model has enjoyed great prominence in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Acquisition occurs subconsciously when the participants are in natural communication where the focus is on meaning. However, this subconscious acquisition process can’t be applicable for the students with autism as they are not leading a smooth life like others. Due to cerebral deficiencies, their ability to modulate sensory input is affected.

The early stage of language acquisition requires the ability to gain the rapid and dynamic ebb and flow of social interaction. It requires very rapid selection, prioritizing, and processing of information. However, the nervous system of these students does not have the capacity to perform this function adequately. The stability of the visual message allows the element necessary for the student to disengage, shift and re-engage attention. Hence, by this process, many of these students appear to understand what they hear. In addition, the visual message remains visible to enable the student how to communicate with others in social interaction. Visual aid for learning aims to improve the independence and self-esteem of all people with learning difficulties.

2. Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this paper are:

- To investigate the autistic learners’ impairments and to follow their development through visual strategies in Bangladesh
- To find out the problems the autistic children are facing in the L2 acquisition in EFL classrooms where there is the lack of visual strategies
- To make suggestions how to overcome those problems and to enhance the awareness among the people (guardians, teachers, and concerned personnel) about the children with autism.

3. Literature Review

Roa and Gagie (2006) describe how more students with autism are taught in different classes of general education. For this, they focus on visual strategies that can be provided in a variety of ways across multiple settings such as school, homework, and within the community.

Roa and Gagie (2006) draw some reasons to show the importance of visual strategies for teaching the special children. The reasons are:

i. Visual aids can attract and hold a student’s attention
ii. They enable the student to focus on the message and reduce anxiety
iii. They make an abstract expression, concept more concrete thoughts for the students
iv. They help the student to express his or her thoughts
v. They help all students.

Visual supports have been successfully used to teach children with autism in a variety of skills. These skills are literary skills, cooking, encouraging positive behavior, and providing activity schedules. Computer and video programs are also used as visual aids in teaching learning process of the autistic children.

Roa and Gagie (2006) state that visual supports help bring in structure, routine, and sequence that many children with autism require these to carry out their daily activities. In this connection, Dalrymple (1989) declares that along with impaired communication, the children with autism also face difficulty to understand social communication cues such as gestures, facial expression, body language, and voice intonation. Hence, as a rule of thumb, the more people with autism can be provided with visual cues, the better they will understand what they are supposed to do.

Roa and Gagie (2006) also suggest the following points for implementing an effective support within the classroom:

1. Breaking down the desired task/behavior into discrete steps (task analysis)
2. Deciding an appropriate visual support for each step (pictures)
3. Using individual, explicit, and systematic instructions
4. Prompting and fading procedures as needed to guide and teach students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to use the visual supports
5. A session to see if the student is meeting the targeted objective.

3. Methodology

By nature, this is a primary research. This research is based on authentic data as first-hand original information regarding autistic students’ comprehensive skill on visual aids. The data were collected from the students belong to DEcub, High care and Beautiful Mind (Schools for autistic students), etc., at Uttara in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We also mostly depend on two books namely visual strategies for improving communication by Hodgdon and more than words by Sussman. We visited different autistic schools such as DEcub, High care and Beautiful Mind and conversed with different guardians and teachers by preparing questionnaires. This research also qualifies the characteristics of empirical research as it is based on experience through imitation with evidence and the results are based on specific questions analysis. This study will employ the teachers to think and explore the way to improve autistic students’ spoken skill in the target level. The research has been done combining both qualitative and quantitative research. Here the results and answers have been shown with the presentation of numeral data.

4. Participants and Setting

The participants of this study were autistic learners of primary school ranging in the age of 10-12 years who had completed 5 years of schooling. The total number of the learners was 30. The study was
conducted at different autistic schools of Bangladesh where the medium of instruction is English. For this study, researchers have interviewed autistic learners, teachers, and parents; and went through their classroom implication of visual aids.

5. Data Collection

The primary data for the study were collected through two questionnaires for teachers and parents that included mostly close ended questions. Each parent’s written script was examined the common issues they made while writing on any relevant topic. The questionnaires were made on yes/no options. The teachers were asked to respond their agreement or disagreement with the statements and provide suggestions in the few open-ended questions.

5.1. Data analysis of the questionnaire for the parents

To extract data from the parents, a written questionnaire comprising 9 questions (Appendix A) with both fixed alternatives and open-ended questions were used that are discussed below.

The first question was asked to elicit parent’s opinion on whether visual aid helps their child to become more sociable. The answer was “Yes.” The second question was their child’s special preference for a visual aid chart, storytelling and picture description. There was variation in the answer. In response to the third question, all the parents solely agreed with that. But contrarily, parents disagreed to the reply of the fourth question. The fourth question is about the suggestion of the parents besides only showing charts. Maximum parents suggest about picture description. The question number 5th and 6th their children’s reaction to pictures and cultural shock. The answer is affirmative. The questions number 7th and 8th refer to the influence of the first language on the L2 acquisition and the importance of gaining it. Answer to question number 7 is yes and 8 no is number. Last answer is about the positive effectiveness of visual aids points to the effectiveness of visual aids for SLA. From the Table 1, it is evident that overall parents’ attitude to the use of visual aids in EFL classroom is very much remarkable. Most of the parents show their positive response towards the use of visual aids for EFL autistic learners.

5.2. Data analysis of the questionnaire for the teachers

To draw out data from the teachers, questionnaire comprising 9 questions (Appendix B) with fixed alternatives and seven of those are open-ended questions.

The first two questions are asked to elicit student’s adjustment in getting visual instructions. The first answer is positive but second one has negative respond. 3rd question is about the percentage of assistance from visual aids. The respond is huge. 4th question is an open-ended question, and it’s about whether they are cooperative in getting charts or other cues. Teachers answer is number 5th question is about the technique of using silent mode learners, and the answer is through body language or symbols. 6th question is about students respond to visual instructions are maximum or not. The teachers’ reply number 7th question refers to learners who have a problem in selecting and ordering of spoken instruction, and the answer is problem-solving tasks or oral practice. 8th and 9th questions are about students with the problem of echolalia and the habit of using non understandable complex phrases.

Teachers reaction is nonresponsive means nothing to do for the students of echolalia and using complex phrase student’s teachers attitude is to try to understand their saying. Table 2 shows teachers’ remarks towards the use of visual aids for autistic learners. They opine positively that visual aids are helpful to make new learners adjusted with a new situation.

6. Findings

Analyzing all the aspects we find, in this article, visual supports give the student time to focus attention, workout the meaning and keep the message visible when the students need to offer it again. After visiting some schools, we found teachers introduce them with body movement (body language, environmental cues, objects and signs, e.g., logos, labels). In their organization, they use traditional tools such as
Visual strategies can make communication more specific and encourage the autistic children to be more enthusiastic in their learning. In addition to that, visual supports can also enhance the confidence of the parents about the future of their special children. These can remove some of their frustration too. Modeling and prompting by the teacher and selected pupils and the strategies described later may be helpful.

Unusual social communication is the second aspect of these autistic learners. It means that their voices may be too soft, too loud or echoing of words and phrases. Some find direct eye contact with others difficult, even painful, and may focus on the mouth or a point beyond the face, but this does not mean they are not noticing everything through their peripheral eye vision. It is very difficult for the pupils with autism to adjust themselves with the first thing in the day, when they are making the transition from home to school. Changes throughout the day will affect them, for example, going from PE to language (often slow to get changed, because of organizational issues); from break/lunchtime to mathematics class, from science class to sports class and like. In these situations, the autistic children become highly disturbed. If there are more instructions in the target language from the teacher, without some kinds of visual supports on the board, it is likely that they, and perhaps a few others in the class, may get behind since some find processing such verbal information difficult. It is also found that many of them can understand words and phrases of single meaning, but they face difficulty in understanding those words that carry more than one meaning.

They may apply themselves well to learning vocabulary, numbers, set phrases and grammar, taught in a straight forward way, and thus acquires a good basic grounding that helps them through the more challenging social interaction side of learning a language. Some have a dual diagnosis of ASD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder which can result in poor concentration and quite disruptive behavior. There are some children with ASD who may have a specific “dyslexia” learning difficulty, and for this learning vocabulary and reading the foreign language become much harder for them.

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<th>Table 1: Parents’ attitude toward visual aids</th>
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<td>Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Do you think visual aid helps your child to become more sociable?</td>
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<td>2. Is there any option in the class besides picture showing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Does your child respond more through picture than small sentence instruction?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Do you think second language acquisition is more important to be a regular student of main traditional schools?</td>
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<td>5. Are visual aids most effective in SLA?</td>
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SLA: Second language acquisition

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<th>Table 2: Teachers’ attitude toward autistic learners’ reaction against visual aids</th>
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<td>Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Is first language a bar to the acquisition of the second language for EFL autistic children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Does visual aid help a learner to adjust in new culture?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. How much assistance do you get from visual aids?</td>
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<td>4. Are the students cooperative in familiar with chart, pictures, etc.?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Do all students respond to visual instructions?</td>
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EFL: English as a foreign language
7. Recommendations

After visiting some institutions, the researchers believe that if lessons of visual aids are provided with proper as well as practical care, learners will be able to catch up those lessons properly. Although this study was conducted based on the institutions of Uttara, Dhaka, it shows the microscopic view of autistic centers in Bangladesh. Learners’ acquisition of L2 is great, but to some extent, they require special assistance and intensive attentions to have congenital, healthy and systematic environment. For these, the following strategies can be taken.

First, sudden change of the class teachers may affect the learning capacity of the learners with autism, because they are not like the normal children. A teacher who is habituated to conduct classes with them regularly can easily understand their psychology. But in the case of a new teacher, both the teacher and the learners may take the time to adjust with each other. Hence, it is suggested that change of teachers should be lessened.

Second, in the L2 classes, there are a lot of instructions in the foreign language used by the teachers, students with autism might not understand these properly. Their brain does not work as sharply as the normal children. Hence, for their better understanding teachers should use both the L1 and L2 simultaneously.

Third, teachers should retain patience to teach them, and they should be more flexible to the learners even though any of their unusual behaviors is not expected by the teachers. Since they are treated as special children, it’s very usual to have some unusual behaviors from them. Moreover, teachers may repeat the same lesson, again and again, to make them properly understand. Books that are used in the classroom can be chosen considering the mental faculty of the children with autism.

Fourth, to improve their L2 acquisition, teachers may engage them in conversation with others that may enhance the oral proficiency of the autistic learners. Research shows extrovert students can gain target language more rapidly than introverts. In this case, teachers good understanding and positive and encouraging words can be tremendously helpful for the learners.

Fifth, to make them more enthusiastic in the lesson, classrooms can be decorated colorfully. Those teaching materials can be used which may attract them to be more concentrated in the lesson.

Finally, last but not the least, government should launch a special training program for those teachers who wish to dedicate them to teach the autistic learners. Moreover, all these things used in the L2 classes by the teachers can be chosen based on their liking and disliking. The liking things should be ensured more, and the disliking things must be wiped out from the classrooms due to achieve the desired result.

At the end of the paper, this can be said that autistic children are also human being like us. We should extend our loving hand to them so that they may live in the society with great respect. On the other hand, showing negligence may lead them toward a destructive life. If, they, in the L2 classes, are properly guided and motivated with the help of visual aids, we can have something from them beyond of our imagination. Lack of proper visual strategies can cause their drop out from the L2 class. This paper may create more awareness of using visual aids in the EFL classrooms of the autistic learners to acquire the target language.

References

Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire for the parents:
1. Do you think visual aid helps your child to become more sociable?
2. What kind of visual supports does your child like? (chart, map, picture, storytelling chart or picture, etc.)
3. Is there any option in the class besides picture showing since they are objective?
4. What is your suggestion to the school besides only showing the picture?
5. Does your child respond more through picture than small sentence instruction?
6. Does cultural hegemony affect your child on his/her SLA?
7. Does first language hinder your child’s process of L2 acquisition?
8. Do you think second language acquisition is more important to be a regular student of main traditional schools?
9. Are visual aids most effective in SLA?

Appendix B

Questionnaire for the teachers:
1. Do you think the first language is a bar to the acquisition of the second language for English as a foreign language autistic learners?
2. Does a visual aid help learners and parents to adjust in a new culture?
3. How much assistance do you get from visual aids?
4. Do you think all the students are cooperative in getting instructions from chart, map, pictures, and story-telling process through cues?
5. How do you help the special child with the silent mode or no eye contact?
6. Do all students respond to visual instructions?
7. How to control them since they have problem sequencing and organizing spoken instructions?
8. How to regulate them since they have echolalia?
9. How best can we help them when they use complex phrases without full understanding of their meaning?