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Guten Tag! Bonjour! Hola! Why foreign languages have a place in autism education

'Only the clever kids can do languages.'

'My child can't even speak English properly, what's the point of him learning another language?'

'She won't be able to get a GCSE in French so there's no point in beginning it.'

'There are more important things this child needs to learn.'

These are just a few of the many negative statements I have heard about children on the autism spectrum, or with other special educational needs (SEN), and why they shouldn't learn a foreign language. But before I moved into SEN teaching, I originally trained and worked as a teacher of modern foreign languages (MFL), and for me these two areas are not nearly as incompatible as they might first seem.

I myself have a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome and language learning helped me enormously; it was only through learning languages as a teenager and young adult that I learned explicitly about:

- How communication works
- conversational skills
- various social and cultural norms.

I revelled in the logic and exactitude of German grammar, I learned how to use vocabulary more precisely, and living abroad helped me to feel more 'normal'; after all, nobody expects you to get things right if you are a foreigner living overseas. A little bit of eccentricity and misunderstanding are not only acceptable but actually expected in that situation.

So, in my professional career I've been sad to see that MFL is often not offered in many mainstream schools to those children who would actual be able to benefit so much from the subject, amid claims that it is just too difficult, pointless or unimportant. Many adults in the UK, including parents and teaching professionals, also have negative attitudes towards language learning, often rooted in their own experiences of dull lessons or having never needed to put their learning into practice.

Benefits of learning foreign languages

MFL, however, offers a range of benefits to students on the autism spectrum, especially at secondary school when opportunities to focus on communication and life skills in other parts of the curriculum might be limited.

As young people with Asperger's and autism in mainstream schools reach the teenage years, they continue to experience many differences and difficulties with social communication, yet may not wish to participate in social communication groups which they may now perceive as 'childish', 'different' or a waste of time.

In the context of an MFL lesson, however, activities such as engaging in shop or doctor role plays can be turned into an age-appropriate, fun and valid way of learning about social communication skills in another culture and language, as well as being an opportunity to discuss and explore those same skills in English.

Recent research demonstrates that bilingual children have improved executive function, increased theory of mind, improved communication skills and better social skills than their monolingual peers (Kinzler, 2016). In addition, MFL lessons offer many other opportunities to:

- learn conversational skills explicitly through role play, drama and observation
- improve speech skills such as stress, volume, pace and intonation
- focus on language skills such as sentence structure and vocabulary building
- discuss social and cultural differences and expectations.

Often the problem with MFL and SEN is nothing to do with the actual subject; merely with the way it is taught and the current emphasis on passing exams. It has every possibility of being an engaging, practical and challenging subject which can have more benefits for those on the autism spectrum than it would seem. The target need not be a GCSE pass in the subject; but perhaps an improvement in communication skills or a greater awareness of social situations.

So, the next time you are considering the timetable and curriculum for young people with additional needs, think twice before you automatically reach to scratch that line through MFL in order to fit in extra English or life skills. There are inherent opportunities to teach these skills through MFL, and doing this can add real meaning and context to the learning, while ensuring that students access a broad and balanced curriculum.

Our education system as a whole needs to stop thinking merely in terms of what will bring the best exam results and start to think instead of what will bring the most enjoyment and personal benefit to our young people. Get it right, and MFL lessons can bring just this.

References

[Kinzler, K., \(2016\) The superior social skills of bilinguals, New York Times.](#)