



The Indonesian Conference on  
Disability Studies and Inclusive  
Education

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> ICODEE Proceedings

—  
3-4 December 2019

ISBN: 978-623-94189-0-8  
ISSN: 2722-9556

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# INTRODUCING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR AUTISM CHILDREN, WHY NOT?

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### Abstract

*Children with autism tend to have difficulty communicating with others, but their language skills can still develop. This research is a descriptive qualitative study that illustrates English learning activities for autistic students at Talenta Kids School, Salatiga. This school provides educational services for autistic children using comprehensive learning methods and therapeutic methods. There are 7 students in this class but the researchers only focus on 2 students with autism as the object of this study. The learning activities of English students with autism are carried out by applying the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. This method connects vocabulary teaching with action. Data obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation. There are several activities carried out in English learning activities such as introducing simple vocabulary, teaching students to understand and following oral instructions from their teacher using simple English, encouraging students to respond to other people's words and describe something, singing, dancing and playing English games, as well as teaching reading and writing English in a simple way. The results showed that there was high enthusiasm from autistic students when learning English. They are able to respond and communicate well despite some obstacles. In addition, they also become more interested in focusing on their teacher.*

**Keywords:** *Children with autism; English learning; TPR*

## Abstrak

Anak-anak dengan autisme cenderung mengalami kesulitan dalam berkomunikasi dengan orang lain, akan tetapi keterampilan bahasa mereka tetap dapat berkembang. Penelitian ini penelitian kualitatif deskriptif yang menggambarkan kegiatan belajar Bahasa Inggris untuk siswa autis di Talenta Kids School, Salatiga. Sekolah ini menyediakan layanan pendidikan untuk anak-anak autis menggunakan metode pembelajaran dan metode terapi yang komprehensif. Ada 7 siswa di kelas ini tetapi peneliti hanya fokus pada 2 siswa dengan autisme sebagai objek penelitian ini. Kegiatan belajar Bahasa Inggris siswa autis dilakukan dengan menerapkan metode *Total Physical Response* (TPR). Metode ini menghubungkan antara mengajar kosa kata dengan tindakan. Data didapatkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Ada beberapa kegiatan yang dilakukan dalam kegiatan belajar Bahasa Inggris seperti memperkenalkan kosa kata sederhana, mengajar siswa untuk memahami dan mengikuti instruksi lisan dari guru mereka menggunakan Bahasa Inggris sederhana, mendorong siswa untuk menanggapi kata-kata orang lain menggambarkan sesuatu, bernyanyi, menari dan bermain permainan Bahasa Inggris, serta mengajar membaca dan menulis Bahasa Inggris dengan cara yang sederhana. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ada antusiasme yang tinggi dari siswa autis ketika belajar Bahasa Inggris. Mereka mampu merespon dan berkomunikasi dengan baik walaupun ada beberapa kendala. Selain itu, mereka juga menjadi lebih tertarik untuk fokus pada guru mereka.

**Kata kunci:** Anak dengan autisme; pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, TPR

## A. Introduction

A language is a communication tool for someone to express the meaning and idea. While communication means a skill that involves the process of speaking, listening, and understanding systematically and continuously. Without mastering the language, people will have difficulty in communicating with others. On the contrary, someone who has good language skills will easily socialize with people in a community. That is why, ideally, every person must have good language skills. Santoso, et al. (2004) argue that language as a communication tool has four functions such as; information function, self-expression function, adaptation and integration functions, and social control function.

Meanwhile, English as a Foreign Language has a very strategic position in the world. The use of English is very important to keep up with increasingly advanced global developments. In addition, having English skills for young generations is a very positive thing, especially in entering the era of the industrial revolution 4.0. The young generations are required to be able to adapt to technological advances where foreign languages as the main communication tool in winning a global competition.

Education is a right for all Indonesian citizens, including children with special needs such as autism children. Therefore, the role of education must be in line with the demands of the globalization era. English is one of the keys to winning in this era of progress. It is necessary

to teach English to autistic children in order to prepare them before entering inclusive schools and public schools. The goal of teaching English to autism children is not only to teach the foreign language but rather to the extent to which autism children can receive any materials in education. Every child has their own potential that can be developed, including autism children. By choosing the right teaching methods and techniques, learning English can also be introduced to them.

## **B. Theoretical Review**

Actually, the word "autism" comes from the Greek word "autos," which means "self." It describes conditions in which a person is removed from social interaction. In other words, autism means an understanding interested in his own world or "isolated self". It is a severe developmental disorder or neurobiological factor that is widespread and can occur in children in the first three years of life (Saad et al., 2018). Yuwono (2013, p. 24) also said that autism is a disorder about how children see the world and how they learn through their experiences. Children with autistic disorders are usually less able to feel social contact (Mazurek et al., 2017). That is why they have to be stimulated to have good communication skills in the social environment.

There are some principles in teaching for autism children based on Dikdasmen Depdiknas, 2004;

- a. Structured. Teaching for autism children is applied to a structured principle. It means that all the teaching materials are easiest and can be done by children.
- b. Patterned. The autism children's activities are usually formed from a patterned and scheduled routine, both at school and at home (the environment), from waking up to going back to sleep.
- c. Programmed. The basic principles programmed are useful for giving direction to the objectives to be achieved and making it easier to conduct evaluations.
- d. Consistent. In the implementation of teaching for autism children, the principle of consistency is absolutely necessary. This means: if the child behaves positively giving a positive response to the stimulus, the supervising teacher must quickly give a positive response (reward/reinforcement), as well as if the child behaves negatively.

- e. Continuous. Continuous here includes the continuity between the basic principles of teaching, education programs, and their implementation. Continuity in the implementation of education not only in schools but also must be followed up for activities at home and the environment around children.

Based on the above explanation it is concluded that teaching for autism children requires appropriate strategies and methodologies because they have special characteristics. One of the best methods for teaching autism children, especially in introducing English as a Foreign Language is through the TPR method.

There was some previous research related to this research such as research conducted by Ghani, and Hanim (2014) identified that the Total Physical Response method was confirmed to be appropriate for teaching English vocabulary and for children. It was an effective methodology in helping slow young learners in mastering English as a second language. Furthermore, Hanim et al (2013) agreed that TPR was confirmed to be an appropriate method for teaching English vocabulary for children since this method teaches the language similarly as the process that the children learned their native language. This research had the novelty aspect compared to the previous research since this research was conducted to introduce English as a Foreign Language for autism children.

Total Physical Response (TPR) is an interesting English learning method which is developed by Dr. James J Asher in 1988. It is the language teaching method that combines the speech and action. This method also attempts to teach the language through Physical activity (Richard & Rodgers, 2001; Rokhayati, 2017). The activities in TPR are based on the combination of command, speech, and movement and attempts to teach the language through physical movement. Actually, the Total Physical Response (TPR) method is a "natural method" in language acquisition. Asher (1988: 2-4) stated that there are three natural processes of language acquisition for children: (1) Children develop listening competence before they develop the ability to speak at the early stage of first language acquisition, (2) Children's ability in listening comprehension is acquired because they are acquired to respond physically to spoken language in the form of parental commands, and (3) Once a foundation in listening comprehension has been established, speech evolves naturally and effortlessly out of it.

Moreover, Freeman & Larsen in 2000 determined 13 guiding principles of applying TPR in the classroom, such as:

- a. The target language should be presented in chunks, not just word by word.
- b. The students' understanding of the target language should be developed before speaking.
- c. Students initially learn one part of the language rapidly by moving their bodies.
- d. The imperative is a powerful linguistic device through which the teacher can direct student behavior.
- e. Students can learn through observing actions as well as by performing the actions themselves.
- f. It is very important that students feel successful. Feelings of success and low anxiety facilitate learning.
- g. Students should not be made to memorize fixed routines.
- h. Correction should be carried out in an unobtrusive manner.
- i. Students must develop flexibility in understanding novel combinations of target language chunks. They need to understand more than the exact sentences used in training. Novelty is also motivating.
- j. Language learning is more effective when it is fun.
- k. Spoken language should be emphasized over written language.
- l. Students will begin to speak when they are ready.

Students are expected to make errors when they first begin speaking. Teachers should be tolerant of them. Work on the fine details of the language should be postponed until students have become somewhat proficient.

So based on the explanation above, we can conclude about the characteristic of the TPR method as the following:

- a. In TPR, listening activity is the primary in leading activity in the classroom.
- b. All the students must take part in the classroom actively.
- c. The teacher must prepare activities before teaching.
- d. TPR is identical with body movement or action while learning a language.
- e. Students must give a response with action during the teaching and learning process.
- f. Teaching should pay more attention to meaning rather than form.
- g. Real communication happens when applying this method.
- h. TPR can maintain long-term memory for children in learning a language.

### C. Methodology

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method that aims to describe the implementation of introducing English as a Foreign Language for autism children at Talenta Kids School, Salatiga. This school provides education for children with special needs and developmental disorders using learning methods and comprehensive therapeutic methods, one of which is for autism students. There were 7 students in this class but the researcher only focused on 2 students with an autism background as the object of this study. The instruments used in this research were observation and interview. The observation was used to describe learning activities. The researcher paid attention to students' and teacher's activities, wrote some notes, and took documentation during observation. While the interview was used to get spoken information about the implementation of TEFL for autism children, children's achievement, problems, and teacher's perception. The interview was done to get the opinion about the English teaching and learning process both teacher and student. Furthermore, the information was also got from the headmaster about curriculum, teaching activities, and her perception of introducing English teaching for autism children. Systematically, the steps of the research also stated in the following scheme:

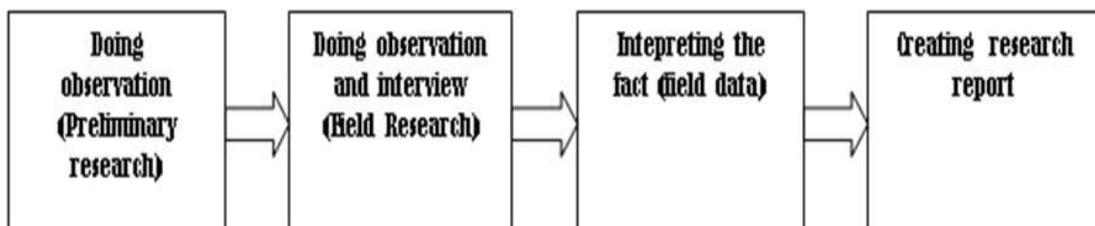


Figure 1. Steps of conducting the research.

#### 1. Doing Observation (Preliminary research)

The observation was the first step in conducting this research. This step was also called as preliminary research before conducting the research. The researcher did observations about the English teaching and learning process for autism children at Talenta Kids School Salatiga. The researcher also conducted an interview with the teacher to get information about learning activities in this school and also to get information about the curriculum used in this school. The result of preliminary research strengthens the researcher to continue doing the field research.

#### 2. Doing Research and Interview (Field Research)

In this step, the researcher took primary and secondary data. The primary data was taken from observation and interview, while the secondary data was taken from the existing data at school and also literature. The researcher observed the English teaching and learning process for autism children, took some documentation, wrote some notes, and also recorded the interview.

### **3. Interpreting the Fact (Field Data)**

After getting the field data, the researcher interpreted the data taken from observation and also interview with the teacher and students. This interpretation data was used to get the findings in this research. In addition, the researcher also analyzed the strength and weaknesses of introducing English as a foreign language in this school.

### **4. Creating a Research Report**

This was the last step that the researcher wrote a research report and publish the result of the research to the public.

## **D. Findings and Discussion**

There are two autistic children who become the object of this study in Talenta Kids School, Salatiga. Both children have behavioral characteristics such as; they cannot do socialization well, they have lack of empathy, they do not have good eye contact, they unable to focus, they are emotional, and they are busy with their own activities. The duration in teaching English is only 45 minutes. Some activities carried out by teacher. First, children are introduced simple vocabulary in English such as parts of body and also things in the classroom. English teacher also asked children to follow verbal instructions use simple instruction in English, such as “touch your eyes, touch your hand, open the door, open your bag, etc.” Furthermore, teacher also encourages children to describe something in simple English by giving them simple questions such as “what is the color of the wall?” etc.

Moreover, in singing and dancing activities, the teacher chooses songs that are energetic and contain English learning material. Children are taught to sing with simple body movements to express the lyric of the song. In this activity, children feel happy and can participate in learning activities. When teaching English, the teacher also brings handmade learning media that is created from colorful kain flannel. Children are asked to guess the numbers and pictures that have been taught by their teacher in that media of learning. And

surprisingly, they can do this activity well. The last activity is to introduce children to read and write in a very simple way. The purpose of this activity is only to introduce them to their reading and writing skills but there is no assessment after this activity has been done.

Based on the observation in the classroom during the English teaching and learning process, it can be concluded such as; children enjoy learning English. This can be seen from their enthusiasm and activeness during learning activities in the classroom. Children can also be a little more focused on their teacher because they learn new things so that their enthusiasm is quite high. Besides the techniques used by teachers in teaching English are also preferred by children such as singing, dancing, inviting children to play games, and inviting children to be active learners through verbal instructions. The most favorite learning activities for children are playing games because the media used by their teacher is quite interesting for children to play.

In addition, there are several obstacles in introducing English to autistic children, including; they sometimes suddenly lose focus and mood in learning, they sometimes do improvisation towards activities that are given by the teacher excessively, they sometimes make noise during learning, and there is a lack of cooperation that is involved in group activities because each of them is busy doing their own activities. In addition, they also scrambled to get the attention of their teacher.

## **E. Conclusion**

Children with autism tend to have difficulty in communication with others, but it does not mean their language skills cannot be developed. The results of the study show that there is high enthusiasm from autism children when learning English at Talenta Kids School, Salatiga. They can respond and communicate well even though there are some obstacles such as when conditioning learning activities. There are lots of advantages of introducing English as a Foreign Language for autism children by applying TPR teaching method, as shown below; 1) it can raise students' interest and enthusiasm in learning English, 2) by using TPR can decrease the pressure of children in learning since they can learn English while doing the action happily, 3) TPR can help children to improve listening and speaking ability because they actively listen then imitate what the teacher says, 5) TPR is really effective to help children in remembering English vocabularies, 6) during English teaching and learning

process, children enjoy all the learning activities, and 7) TPR can improve the mood of children in learning English and encourage them to be active learners.

Finally, introducing English as a Foreign Language to autism children is a positive thing. Although there are some obstacles in the classroom, the selected method can support the achievement of the learning objectives. It can be concluded that English learning as a Foreign Language is not only aimed to support the children to face the globalization era but is also an appropriate therapy that can help them to maximize and explore their abilities, especially in the development of verbal skills. They also become more interested in focusing on their teacher. The result also shows that introducing English as a Foreign Language by implementing the TPR method can increase children's mastery of English vocabulary. Of course, these things depend on other supporting factors such as health, willingness, and mood of the children.

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