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Vocabulary Learning for Students with Autism in the EFL Context: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Insights

Learning vocabulary in English may not be easy for all EFL students, particularly neurodivergent learners such as those with autism. This study investigated the specific challenges autistic learners face in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts by drawing on perceptions from 11 English teachers from Iran, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, Finland, Mexico, Brazil, and Spain. Semi-structured interviews focused on different types of lexical items including collocations and combinations, phrasal verbs, slang, idioms, metaphors, and situation-bound utterances. Teachers were asked to rank these categories and explain which ones posed greater difficulty for autistic learners. They were also asked to share their ideas about vocabulary learning challenges in general and the remedies or approaches that can benefit these students. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that idioms and metaphors were most often perceived as difficult because of their figurative nature, while slang was also identified as challenging due to its cultural and social dimensions. Collocations and phrasal verbs were described as less problematic when tied to routine and practical situations, while situation-bound utterances were seen as manageable if contextualized in real-life settings. Beyond lexical categories, teachers emphasized the importance of contextualization, repetition, and a gradual build-up from parts to wholes, given that autistic learners may have slower reading speeds and require explicit explanations. Idioms in particular required justification and elaboration in order to be understood. Teachers also highlighted the usefulness of visual aids, technological tools, and structured approaches such as flashcards, ABA training, and PECS in supporting vocabulary development. Addressing an underexplored area with scant information, this study makes a novel contribution by providing EFL teachers' perspectives and offering practical guidance on teaching vocabulary to autistic learners.

Keywords:

Autism, EFL, vocabulary learning, idioms, metaphors, collocations, inclusive pedagogy, qualitative interviews