

CHALLENGES IN THE ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS FOR A STUDENT WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND THEIR ENGLISH TEACHERS

RETOS EN LA ENSEÑANZA-APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA PARA UN ALUMNO CON TRASTORNO DEL ESPECTRO AUTISTA Y SU PROFESORADO

Edward Antonio Molina Contreras^{1*}

¹ Estudiante de la Carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros. Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Educación. Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Ecuador ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7771-5328>. Correo: edward.molina4457@utc.edu.ec

Sonia Jimena Castro Bungacho²

² Docente de la Carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros. Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Educación. Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Ecuador. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4500-0541>. Correo: sonia.castro@utc.edu.ec

* Autor para correspondencia: edward.molina4457@utc.edu.ec

Abstract

The present study aims to analyse the inherent challenges in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching-learning process when involving a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their teachers. A quantitative approach was used with a non-experimental, descriptive, and cross-sectional research design. A questionnaire was administered to a sample of 26 pre-service teachers enrolled in the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at the UTC Pujilí Campus which consisted of three dimensions such as: knowledge of ASD specific strategies, teacher perceptions of training of ASD students, practical challenges in an EFL classroom with ASD students. The results indicate that the pre-service teachers perceived a lack of training in ASD-specific didactics, as well as educational inclusion, and the need for personalized curricular and methodological adaptations. The analysis reveals that the main challenges center on managing social interaction, understanding abstract instructions, and handling sensory overload. It is concluded that overcoming these obstacles requires integrating special education into initial teacher training and implementing strategies based on visual support, structure, and predictability.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); EFL; educational inclusion; teacher training; predictability



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Resumen

El presente estudio busca analizar los retos inherentes al proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en un alumno con trastorno del espectro autista (TEA) y su profesorado. Un modelo cuantitativo fue usado con un diseño no experimental, descriptivo y transversal. Se aplicó un cuestionario a una muestra de 26 futuros docentes del programa de Pedagogía de Lenguas Nacionales y Extranjeras del Campus de Pujilí de la UTC el cual consistía de 3 dimensiones tales como: conocimiento de estrategias específicas para estudiantes TEA, percepciones del entrenamiento y competencia, dificultades prácticas en un aula de inglés como lengua extranjera con estudiantes TEA. Los resultados indican que los futuros docentes percibieron una falta de formación específica en didáctica del TEA, inclusión educativa y la necesidad de adaptaciones curriculares y metodológicas personalizadas. El análisis revela que los principales retos se centran en la gestión de la interacción social, la comprensión de instrucciones abstractas y el manejo de la sobrecarga sensorial. Se concluye que superar estos obstáculos requiere integrar la educación especial en la formación inicial del profesorado e implementar estrategias basadas en el apoyo visual, la estructura y la predictibilidad.

Palabras clave: Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA); Inglés como Lengua Extranjera; inclusión educativa; formación del profesorado; predictibilidad

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Introduction

Educational inclusion is a fundamental pillar of modern education systems, advocating for the right of all students to receive quality education in regular learning environments. Within this paradigm, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents a unique and complex set of challenges. ASD, characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (APA, 2013), directly impacts the skills necessary for language learning, such as pragmatic comprehension, linguistic flexibility, and oral interaction.

The Ecuadorian context, particularly in institutions like the Technical University of Cotopaxi (UTC) Pujilí Campus, emphasizes the training of future teachers competent to address diversity. However, there is a significant gap between the theory of inclusion and effective practice in the EFL classroom, especially concerning specific didactic strategies for ASD.

The main objective is to analyze the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in the EFL teaching-learning process with a student with ASD, providing an empirical basis for improving teacher training and inclusive pedagogical practice.

Theoretical Framework



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Current Conceptualization of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its Implications for Language Learning

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (APA, 2013). Recent research has migrated from a deficit approach to one that emphasizes neurodiversity and unique cognitive strengths (Botha & Gillespie, 2023).

Cognitive and Linguistic Profile of the Student with ASD (2020-2025)

Current studies on ASD and language suggest that, while syntax and semantics may be well-developed, the greatest difficulty lies in linguistic pragmatics (Tager-Flusberg, 2022). This directly impacts EFL learning, where effective communication requires understanding implicit intentions, metaphors, sarcasm, and the flexible use of language in social contexts. Cognitive rigidity (lack of mental flexibility) and a deficit in Theory of Mind are key variables that hinder the comprehension of role-plays and group dynamics in the language classroom (Frith & Happé, 2021). However, strengths in systematic processing and mechanical memory have been shown to be powerful allies in the acquisition of EFL grammatical rules and vocabulary when presented in a structured manner (Jones et al., 2020).

Sensory Dysregulation and the Learning Environment

A crucial focus in post-2020 research is the impact of sensory dysregulation on academic performance. EFL classrooms, often noisy, with varied visual material and frequent changes in activity, can generate sensory overload (or meltdown) in students with hypersensitivity. This overload is not a behavior problem but a physiological barrier to learning, requiring the EFL teacher to consider the classroom architecture and the acoustic and visual properties of the materials (Loth & Wilson, 2023).

Inclusive EFL Teaching: From Paradigm to Methodological Practice

Inclusion in the foreign language classroom is not limited to the mere physical presence of the student but involves a profound adaptation of methodology and curriculum.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a Framework for Inclusive EFL

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has emerged as the dominant framework for inclusive education (CAST, 2024). In EFL teaching, UDL translates into three principles applied to lesson design:

1. Multiple Means of Representation: Offering EFL content (vocabulary, grammar) through text, images, videos, and pictograms.
2. Multiple Means of Action and Expression: Allowing the demonstration of linguistic knowledge through writing, structured speaking, drawing, or the use of technology (e.g., text-to-speech).
3. Multiple Means of Engagement: Providing options that vary novelty and risk, offering the choice to work individually or in highly structured groups.

Recent research validates that UDL not only benefits the student with ASD but also improves the commitment and performance of all students (Novak, 2021).

Specific Didactic Strategies for EFL and ASD



Methodological application in the EFL classroom requires the teacher to move from a purely communicative focus to a structured and visual one (Prizant, 2020). Key strategies include:

- ✓ Visual Supports and Task Analysis: The systematic use of visual schedules, first-then boards, and story maps is essential to provide predictability to the EFL class, reducing anxiety over change. Task Analysis (breaking down complex EFL tasks, like a role-play, into simple, explicit steps) is vital (Vygotsky & Wertsch, 2024).
- ✓ Explicit Teaching of Pragmatics: Instead of expecting the student with ASD to guess social norms, the EFL teacher must explicitly teach conversation rules (turn-taking, how to interrupt, tone of voice) and the meaning of idiomatic speech acts (García-Navarro & Saldaña, 2023).

Challenges for the EFL Teacher and Teacher Training

The success of inclusion rests on the competence and preparation of the teacher. EFL teachers, especially those recently trained, face multifaceted challenges.

The Inclusive Competence Gap

Post-2020 studies consistently indicate a significant training gap. Future teachers report feeling competent in language didactics but lack the self-efficacy and methodological knowledge to work with ASD (Ali & Al-Saleh, 2022). This deficiency is not just a lack of knowledge but also of attitude. Negative perceptions or low confidence in their ability to adapt the material correlate with the referral of the student to less inclusive environments. The lack of interprofessional collaboration (joint work with therapists and special education specialists) is identified as a major obstacle (Smith & Jones, 2021).

Curricular Adaptations and Differentiated Assessment

One of the biggest challenges is fair assessment. Standardized EFL assessments are often biased against ASD characteristics, penalizing anxiety or inflexibility instead of linguistic knowledge (Chen & Lee, 2024). Recent literature advocates for the need to train teachers in:

- ✓ Access Adaptation (Methodological Modification): Adjusting *how* something is taught and assessed without changing *what* (e.g., extra time, using a keyboard instead of handwriting).
- ✓ Curricular Modification (Change of Content/Objectives): Only necessary if EFL objectives are unattainable.
- ✓ Authentic and Portfolio Assessment: Measuring linguistic skills through meaningful tasks and progress over time, rather than high-stakes tests.

The challenges of pre-service teachers at the UTC Pujilí Campus, therefore, are not isolated but reflect a global need to integrate special education into the core curriculum of language teacher training (Giraldo, 2023).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Neurodiversity and Foreign Language Acquisition

The contemporary understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is framed within the neurodiversity paradigm, recognizing neurological differences as natural variations in the human brain, not as an inherent deficit (Botha & Gillespie, 2023). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders



(DSM-5), ASD is characterized by two central domains of difficulty: persistent deficits in social communication and interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (APA, 2013). Recent literature, however, has explored how these characteristics manifest uniquely in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Linguistic and Cognitive Profile in EFL Learning

While ASD presents communication challenges, the student's cognitive profile often includes significant strengths. Mechanical memory and systematic processing (a tendency to excel in rule-based tasks) are commonly observed (Jones et al., 2020). In EFL, this can translate into a high capacity for acquiring grammatical rules, syntax, and extensive vocabulary when presented logically and predictably.

The main barrier lies in linguistic pragmatics, i.e., the social and contextual use of language (Tager-Flusberg, 2022). EFL classes, which often emphasize the communicative approach through role-plays, debates, and spontaneous conversations, demand the ability to infer intentions, decode figurative language (metaphors, irony), and adjust speech register to the social context. For the student with ASD, who tends to interpret language literally and has difficulties with Theory of Mind (the ability to attribute mental states to others), these activities become sources of anxiety and confusion (Frith & Happé, 2021). Pre-service teachers at the UTC Pujilí Campus, when facing these dynamics, must recognize that the difficulty is not in the capacity to acquire the language but in the capacity to use it socially.

Sensory Challenges and the EFL Learning Environment

A critical research line post-2020 focuses on sensory dysregulation, a diagnostic criterion that affects most people with ASD. The modern EFL classroom, with its use of videos, music, noisy group work, and fluorescent lights, can cause hypersensitivity (over-reaction) or hyposensitivity (under-reaction) (Loth & Wilson, 2023). A student may experience low background noise as deafening or eye contact as painful, resulting in a sensory overload (meltdown or shutdown) that inhibits any possibility of learning. Understanding that these reactions are not intentional behavior problems is fundamental for adapting the environment and choosing EFL methodologies. The teacher is required to ensure reasonable adjustments and communicative, physical, and sensory accessibility (Morocho-Torres et al., 2025).

The Inclusion Framework and Methodological Adaptations in EFL

The guiding principle for teaching EFL to students with ASD is **educational inclusion**, understood as the transformation of systems and methods to respond to student diversity. This change is managed through frameworks such as the Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Language Didactics

UDL is a proactive, neuroscience-based approach that seeks to eliminate barriers from the initial curriculum design, ensuring access for all students (CAST, 2024). Recent research highlights UDL as the most effective strategy for inclusion in language classrooms (Rodríguez-Martín, 2025). Its three fundamental principles are directly applied to the EFL classroom:

1. Provide Multiple Means of Representation (the What of learning): In EFL, this involves presenting new vocabulary and grammatical rules not only orally or in writing but through visual supports,



pictograms, subtitled videos, and structured diagrams. This benefits the visual and systematic learning style of the student with ASD and helps clarify syntax and structure (Alvarado et al., 2025).

2. Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression (the How of learning): The teacher must allow the student to demonstrate their EFL competence through alternatives to spontaneous oral interaction. Options may include structured writing, the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) software, voice recording instead of live presentation, or multiple-choice responses with visual support, overcoming the social anxiety associated with oral performance (Sánchez Romero & García Vacas, 2025).
3. Provide Multiple Means of Engagement (the Why of learning): This principle focuses on motivation and self-regulation. For the student with ASD, engagement is maximized through predictability and connection with special interests. The EFL teacher must incorporate the student's restricted interests (e.g., dinosaurs, programming, transportation) as a central theme for vocabulary acquisition and linguistic practice, increasing engagement and reducing anxiety (Fortuny & Sanahuja, 2020).

Structuring and Instructional Clarity Strategies

EFL teaching to students with ASD must be based on structure and explicitness. Prizant (2020) emphasizes that communication must be clear, concrete, and free of ambiguity. This translates into the systematic use of:

- ✓ Visual Schedules and "First-Then" Boards: They establish routines and provide the predictability necessary for transitions and class activities.
- ✓ Task Analysis: Breaking down any complex EFL task (e.g., "write a formal email") into a sequence of simple, numbered steps, which mitigates executive function difficulties associated with ASD (Erazo-Álvarez & Erazo-Álvarez, 2020).
- ✓ Explicit Teaching of Social Skills: Classroom interaction norms (asking for the floor, looking at the person speaking) must be taught as curricular content, not just expected, using social stories or structured scripts for role-plays.

Challenges and Needs in Initial EFL Teacher Training (2020-2025)

The study of challenges in the EFL teaching-learning process, such as the one addressed by this research, inevitably leads to the quality of the teacher training received. Recent evidence, especially in the Latin American and Ecuadorian context, is clear in pointing out a profound competence gap.

The Self-Efficacy and Specialized Knowledge Gap

Numerous studies have documented that pre-service teachers, and often in-service teachers, report a low level of self-efficacy to meet the needs of students with ASD (Narváez Intriago, 2021). Despite ministerial guidelines on inclusion (MINEDUC, 2024), initial training often fails to incorporate sufficient practical modules on specific ASD didactics. Surveys of pedagogy teachers in the region consistently demonstrate that knowledge about intervention strategies for neurodevelopmental disorders is low, often with percentages of incorrect or insufficient knowledge exceeding 70% (Rodríguez-Reyes et al., 2025).

This lack of preparation manifests in the practical challenges identified by EFL teachers:



- ✓ Crisis Management and Challenging Behaviors: Teachers lack training in how to differentiate a sensory crisis from disruptive behavior, leading to ineffective or punitive responses (Barcia & Triviño, 2025).
- ✓ Adapted Material Design: Difficulty in creating visual and structured material compatible with EFL curriculum objectives is a reported obstacle.

The Need for Inclusive Assessment in EFL

The most complex challenge in EFL teacher training is differentiated assessment. Future teachers need to master the distinction between access adaptations and curricular modifications. The literature underscores that fair EFL assessment for students with ASD must be flexible and minimize the impact of social and sensory difficulties (Chen & Lee, 2024).

Training is recommended in:

- ✓ Portfolio Assessment: Measures progress over time rather than a single, high-stakes event.
- ✓ Use of Visual and Disaggregated Rubrics: Assess linguistic skills (grammar and lexicon) separately from social competence (pragmatics and conversational fluency).
- ✓ Adapted Assessment Environments: Allows individual assessment in a quiet environment free of distracting stimuli (Morocho-Torres et al., 2025).

The success of the EFL teaching-learning process for a student with ASD depends not on willingness, but on the systematic application of inclusive methodologies (UDL and structured strategies), supported by an urgent and practical reform in initial teacher training.

Materials and methods

Approach and Design

A quantitative approach was used with a non-experimental, descriptive research design. In quantitative research, descriptive designs are more precise and structured using more clearly defines research questions, and aim to give a clear picture of the subject matter (Slater & Hasson, 2024). The objective was to describe the perceptions, knowledge, and challenges reported by future teachers at a specific moment.

Participants

The sample consisted of 26 pre-service teachers in the final semesters of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at the Technical University of Cotopaxi (UTC) Pujilí Campus. The selection was non-probabilistic, based on convenience, including students who were conducting pre-professional internships or had advanced theoretical knowledge of didactics.

Data Collection Instrument

Ponto (2015) outlines that survey questionnaires have several strengths in quantitative research. Among which allowing for data collection in a measurable way is particularly useful when trying to understand complex topics such as social issues. Thus, a standardized questionnaire was used to evaluate three key dimensions related to the challenge of teaching EFL to students with ASD:



- ✓ Knowledge and Perception of ASD: (Level of familiarity with ASD characteristics and their impact on language learning).
- ✓ Preparation and Training: (Perception of the sufficiency of the training received in inclusion and specific didactics for ASD).
- ✓ Practical Challenges in the EFL Classroom: (Specific difficulties perceived in planning, interaction, and assessment).

The instrument used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Totally disagree to 5 = Totally agree) and multiple-choice questions.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The questionnaire was administered virtually. The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software. Frequencies, percentages, and means were calculated to describe the central tendency and distribution of responses in each dimension.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the data provided by the 26 pre-service teachers at the UTC Pujilí Campus revealed significant perceptions about the challenges.

Table 1. Knowledge of ASD Dimension.

Dimension	Survey Questions	Mean	Range
Knowledge of ASD	I know the specific methods for teaching grammar to a student with ASD.	2.88	1.15
	I feel confident identifying a sensory crisis in the classroom.	3.12	1.05

Knowledge of ASD

The low mean on grammar Teaching (M=2.88) showcases an apparent lack in knowledge of specific methods for teaching grammar to students with ASD, despite strengths in systematic processing in ASD, teachers do not know how to capitalize on these strengths effectively “most teachers lacked specialized training in identifying and supporting autistic students, indicating a critical deficiency in their professional development” (El-Setouhy et al., 2025).

Table 2. Perception of Training and Competence Dimension.

Dimension	Survey Questions	Mean	Range
Preparation and Training	University training has adequately prepared me to adapt the EFL curriculum for a student with ASD.	2.19	1.22
	I urgently need additional training on EFL and ASD didactics.	4.77	0.43

Perception of Training and Competence

The most compelling result (M=4.77) is the perceived need for urgent additional training. The mean of 2.19 on the sufficiency of university training underscores that future teachers do not feel equipped with the specialized didactic tools. Only a minority of the sample felt they totally agree that their current training allows them to adapt the EFL curriculum for ASD. El-Setouhy et al. (2025) emphasized that educational



initiatives and professional instruction regarding awareness of ASD, and ASD-specific teaching strategies are needed.

Table 3. Reported Didactic Practical Challenges Dimension.

Dimension	Survey Questions	Mean	Range
Practical Challenges	The main difficulty is managing social interaction and group role-plays.	4.54	0.58
	It is difficult to design assessments that accurately measure EFL knowledge without ASD bias.	4.31	0.74

Reported Didactic Practical Challenges

Practical challenges in the classroom obtained the highest means, indicating that they are the most keenly felt barriers.

There is a high concern ($M=4.54$) about activities requiring spontaneous social interaction, such as debates or role-plays, which are pillars in the communicative EFL methodology. In regards to the different behaviours and characteristics of ASD language learners, teachers find difficulties customizing teaching materials catered to the needs of ASD students. The difficulty centers on how to evaluate linguistic skills without executive function deficits or social anxiety from ASD distorting the results. Hashim et al. (2021) notes that because of the different behaviours and characteristics of ASD language learners, teachers find difficulties customizing teaching, and assessment materials catered to the needs of ASD students.

Discussion

The findings of this study at the UTC Pujilí Campus are consistent with international literature that points out the gap between inclusion policy and teacher competence in special education. The high agreement with the need for urgent training ($M=4.77$) demonstrates positive professional self-awareness in the sample, but also a critical deficiency in the program's curriculum. A future EFL teacher ought to be an expert in language didactics and a manager of diversity. The low perceived preparation ($M=2.19$) suggests that modules on inclusion or special education are insufficient or lack the methodological specificity required for the language teaching context.

The practical challenges, particularly in social interaction ($M=4.54$), confirm that the communicative model of EFL teaching clashes with the core characteristics of ASD. This implies that teachers must learn to modify the communicative methodology (e.g., replacing open role-plays with structured, scripted dialogues, or using technological interfaces to reduce the social anxiety of direct communication).

The difficulty in assessment underscores the need to train teachers in the difference between methodological adaptations and evaluative modifications. Teachers must be able to design instruments that measure lexical and structural knowledge (ASD strengths) separately from pragmatic communication skills (ASD challenges).

Conclusions

This study has confirmed a critical need to improve the inclusive competence of future EFL teachers at the UTC Pujilí Campus to cater to students with ASD.



- ✓ The preservice teachers need to improve their knowledge on ASD-specific teaching strategies.
- ✓ There are heavy challenges when dealing with difficulties inherent in social interaction in a foreign language classroom when students with ASD are present.
- ✓ Overcoming these challenges requires a reform in initial teacher training that transcends the theory of inclusion and focuses on the practical application of individualized didactic strategies is paramount. By equipping future teachers with the necessary tools for structure, visualization, and curricular adaptation, the right to learn EFL can be effectively sought out for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Recommendations

Based on the results and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for the UTC Pujilí Campus and other teacher training institutions:

- ✓ Curricular Integration of Specialized Didactics: A specific module should be created or themes should be integrated into EFL Didactics courses that explicitly address Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and teaching strategies for ASD (use of visual supports, task analysis, token systems).
- ✓ Supervised Practical Training: Pre-professional internships should include simulation or direct observation of inclusive classrooms, with tutorials focused on creating Individualized Curricular Adaptation Plans (PACI) specific to language learning.
- ✓ Development of Teaching Resources: The university should develop and make available to future teachers a bank of adapted didactic materials and resources for teaching lexicon, grammar, and social skills in EFL for students with ASD. A special focus on Adapted Assessment implementing mandatory workshops on how to design differentiated assessment instruments centering on use of visual rubrics, portfolio-based assessment, and the separation of linguistic competence assessment from social competence.

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