
Understanding and accommodating neurodiversity in ELT

Webinar handout

by Claire Hart

1. What is neurodiversity?

When we talk about neurodiversity, there are several things that we need to keep in mind:

- The term 'neurodiversity' was coined relatively recently to reflect the findings of research into the lives, experiences and brain functionality of people with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and dyslexia.
- The term's aim is to reduce the stigma around the above mentioned 'disorders' and 'learning difficulty' by suggesting that neurodiverse people simply have brains that function differently to those who don't have them.
- Some people who are now classified as neurodiverse embrace the term, while others find it offensive because they feel that it minimises the negative effects their 'disorder' or 'learning difficulty' has had on their lives.

Essentially, the 'diversity' in neurodiversity is a difference in brain functionality and brain development.

2. Perception vs. the reality of neurodiversity

The diversity of experiences which exists within neurodiversity must be kept in mind when discussing this subject. Some people on the autism spectrum may be unable to speak and unable to care for themselves as adults, for example, while others will appear to live 'normal' lives, going to mainstream schools and then getting regular jobs and having families. However normal a neurodiverse person's life may appear to be though, keep in mind that they will be

dealing with challenges on a daily basis, from the fear of potential rejection to an inability to calm mental hyperactivity. Typical perceptions of neurodiversity tend to either focus on the perceived extent of their disability or on their perceived minimal divergence from the acceptable sphere of human behaviour. A more accurate typical reflection of reality tends to be something in between these two extremes.

3. What it means to accommodate neurodiversity

The idea of accommodating suggests that the person doing the accommodating is being forced to make changes in response to other people's needs in order to overcome the perceived obstacles that these needs have created. However, I would argue that the accommodations teachers need to make to help neurodiverse students to learn more effectively will also benefit the class as a whole.

4. Practical tips for any classroom

- **Tip 1:** As many neurodiverse students have a fear of the unknown and a need for structure, it's important to set clear lesson and course objectives and let students know when, where and how everything is going to happen.
- **Tip 2:** As many neurodiverse students have a tendency towards perfectionism, it's important to set manageable and realistic objectives for tasks and foster a classroom culture where not getting everything right is perfectly OK.
- **Tip 3:** Due to the way that many neurodiverse students focus on tasks, allow them to take breaks when they need to and understand that a lack of focus does not necessarily mean a lack of interest or application. Do not disturb them when they are 'in flow'.
- **Tip 4:** As many neurodiverse students tend to have strong opinions, be open to any challenges they might make to your opinion or the opinions of other students. Understand that it is not their intention to be rude and encourage the ensuing debate.
- **Tip 5:** As many neurodiverse students live with hyper-sensitivity, communicate clearly and unambiguously with them. Try not to allow any room for the false interpretation of your words and appreciate that your words and actions may have a deeper impact on neurodiverse students than they would have on other students.
- **Tip 6:** As many neurodiverse students tend to have a lack of a 'filter', i.e., a means of identifying what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, do not punish 'unfiltered' behaviour. Appreciate that students may not have control over this behaviour. Bring them back by engaging them with something you know they are interested in.

A recording of Claire Hart's webinar can be watched here:

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-and-events/webinars/webinars-teachers/inclusion-neurodiversity-and-neuomyths-elt-mini-event-0>

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