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## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

**Masaryk University**

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| **Applicant** | Mgr. Jana Zerzová, Ph.D. |
| **Habilitation thesis** | Learning English as a Foreign Language with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Reflection of Classroom Practices and Experience(s) |
| **Reviewer** | M Camino Bueno Alastuey |
| **Reviewer's home unit, institution** | Public University of Navarre |

The thesis presented is an original work focusing on the classroom experiences of children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder as well as their parents' views and their teachers' views and practices in the subject of English as a Foreign Language. The thesis is quite complete and includes all parts of a scholarly work. The main research aim was to investigate the English classroom experience of ASD learners of English and their teachers, focusing on aspects related both to the classroom environment and lessons in general, as well as on the specifics of EFL lessons and learning English. The research intends to develop an ASD-friendly Foreign Language Teaching Model to guide teachers.

The topic has been well defined and the introduction (Chapter 1) outlines ASD prevalence globally and nationally highlighting differences. It tries to pinpoint challenges and support for those students using qualitative methods, and it is presented as the first study of its kind in the Czech Republic, with implications inclusive education.

Chapter 2 introduces Autism Spectrum disorders and explains the terminology and characteristics as well as the abilities and challenges (social, communicative, sensory, imaginative, adaptive) these students face when learning. This section has practical classroom relevance and acknowledges all the different strengths, deficits and impairments they might have while also explaining the possible teaching strategies that have been proposed in Foreign language classrooms.

Chapter 3 comprises the literature review and starts by justifying the reasons to include only some of the articles found and reviews what has been done on the topic showing the need for the research and its originality as it fills a gap in research, not only because of the location of the research but also because of its focus.

Chapter 4 covers the methodology of the study. The chapter is illustrative, the sample is varied to make triangulation possible by showing the data from different angles so that the reader can get a complete picture of the situation and learning contexts from the point of view of different actors. The way the data were collected and analysed is also described as well as the coding carried out, and they are adequate for this kind of research. Nevertheless, some kind of interrater reliability agreement, such as Krippendorf's interrater reliability index, should have been carried out among the three coders to ensure coding reliability. Ten research questions are presented so as to be answered by the study.

Chapter 5 presents the findings and it is probably the weakest part of the thesis as many of the findings consist of very lengthy extracts from the data and sometimes illustrating exactly

the same points so they become repetitive, and the reporting could have been shortened without losing details. Nevertheless, the account is very complete and illustrates perfectly what is happening in those classes in the Czech Republic even though the sample is not as large as it should be for the findings to be generalisable.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings and answers the 10 research questions posed in the methodology section. The discussion is well presented and organised around those RQ, which include characteristics and obstacles, environment adjustments, teaching and learning adjustments, TA support, preferences and strengths and challenges related to skills and systems, participation in class activities, teacher preparedness to deal with ASD students, assessment of these students, materials and activities specific for then and preparation time needed. What the discussion points out is that there is an enormous variety and it is quite difficult to advise on common interventions. This chapter's strengths are that it shows balance between deficits and challenges and identifies practical levers (environment, facilitative motivation, buddy system).

Chapter 7 proposes an ASD-Friendly Foreign Language Teaching Model, which focuses on four aspects: (a) environment/management/interaction, (b) TA roles, testing/assessment, homework, family, (c) language activities (reception/production/interaction/mediation), (d) language systems and topics, and proposes ideas to deal with ASD challenges in all those aspects. The proposal is concrete so it can be applied, balances support and attention to higher performance profiles, it is realistic, especially for assessment. However, many aspects require school-level implementation (scheduling or spaces), and require a deal of time devoted to identifying these students and their needs.

Finally, chapter 8 presents the conclusion of the study signalling its originality, relevance, quality and applicability to the Foreign language classroom, while emphasising these students tend not to have serious problems in these classes and learning an FL is beneficial for them.

**Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)
Questions for the candidate:
1) Characteristics of ASD students
- How do masking strategies, specifically in girls, impact FLL?
- Are savant-like students common or rare?
2) Strategies
- What role do parents vs. teachers perceive as most critical in supporting ASD learners?
- Which specific strategies can be developed in Czech schools?
3) Findings
- Do you think your findings can be adapted for other languages beyond English, or in different cultural/educational systems?
- How might quantitative approaches complement the qualitative findings to broaden validity?
**4) Regarding the proposed model**
**-** What's the minimal effective set of environmental changes for schools with limited control over rooms/timetables?
- Can the four TA roles be turned into a **checklist/rubric** with examples and triggers (before/during/after lesson)?
- Which formats of assessment (e.g., **noise-clean audio + captions + visuals**, oral prompts with visual cues) preserve validity best for ASD learners?
- Which visual planners/page layouts and **timing/transition aids** (timers, step trackers) measurably reduce cognitive load?
- What communication cadence/templates with parents best align classroom supports with home strategies?
5) Testing he model
- How would you test the model to see how it works?

- How would you design a quantitative study to have enough data to prove that the model works for a larger sample?

**Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled "Learning English as a Foreign Language with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Reflection of Classroom Practices and Experience(s)" by Jana Zerzová **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Didactics of Foreign Language.

Date:   01/10/2025                              Signature: