

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

### Masaryk University

#### 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

Prof. PhDr. Karel Pančocha, Ph.D.

#### Reviewer's home unit, institution

Institute for Research in Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University

### Overall assessment

The habilitation thesis examines foreign language learning (English) among autistic learners in Czech mainstream schools. The dissertation is structured coherently and keeps a clear, practice-facing orientation: background and terminology (Chapter 2), literature review (Chapter 3), methodology (Chapter 4), findings (Chapter 5), discussion answering research questions (Chapter 6), implications for teaching (Chapter 7), and conclusion (Chapter 8). Across chapters, the author maintains focus on classroom realities, multi-voice perspectives (learners, parents, teachers, autistic adults), and transparent analytic procedures. The work is careful in scope, avoids over-claiming, and consistently connects qualitative evidence to everyday classroom practice.

### Originality and Contribution

The thesis addresses an under-researched intersection of ELT didactics and autism in the Czech mainstream context.

Its distinctive value lies in bringing together perspectives from learners, parents, teachers, and autistic adults, and in translating synthesized findings into a teacher-facing model with four interlocking parts (classroom environment/management; roles of the teaching assistant plus assessment and home links; language activities—reception, production, interaction, mediation; and language systems/topics).

The model is explicit about scope and non-exhaustiveness, yet it is ready for immediate use in teacher training and school practice.

### Theoretical Grounding

Chapter 2 introduces key characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and links them to classroom variables such as sensory sensitivity, executive functioning, anxiety, and social communication. Pedagogical strategies with ASD learners emphasize structure, predictability, explicit and literal instructions, and individualization. All the information are relevant and up to date. The chapter also describe school policies listing strengths and possible difficulties of autistic learners in foreign language lessons (e.g., quick vocabulary learning for some, but also challenges with pronunciation or with tasks that do not match their preferences). The text remains sensitive to learner heterogeneity and avoids essentialism. The theoretical scope of the thesis is logical, coherent but not without some limitations. The author mostly uses the US based DSM 4 and 5 to describe ASD. However, these diagnostic manuals are not widely used in Europe. In the Czech context, ICD-10 is still used by professionals on a daily basis and will soon be replaced by ICD-11. The author provides brief information about the manuals but could have provided a more comprehensive bridge between the international diagnostic updates (DSM/ICD). Also, short discussion on recent scientific and/or cultural issues related to Asperger's syndrome would have enhanced the chapter (for instance the topic of Neurodiversity, i.e. Autistic people as a cultural minority).

### **Review of Related Research**

The literature review (chapter 3) clearly maps the complicated terrain of research in ASD foreign language learning. Even before the author focuses on this topic, she provides an overview of several other topics that are currently being studies within the realm of ASD (ex. First language acquisition, bilingualism, etc.). This clearly shows that the author possesses a comprehensive knowledge in ASD and language even outside the topic being presented in this dissertation. The literature review reports a logical research questions, transparent search and screening process and stays aligned to foreign language learning rather than general language development or immersion. Given the thin and uneven evidence base, the chapter appropriately synthesizes without over-generalization and identifies where empirical foundations are weak. The review sets up the analytic categories used later in the dissertation, maintaining conceptual coherence of the whole thesis.

### **Methodology**

The design of the study is qualitative and multi-informant (learners, parents, teachers, autistic adults). Data come from interviews and qualitative surveys. The corpus is very extensive (399 pages; ~99,500 words). I believe the qualitative, multi-informant design is appropriate for the research aims and follows the current international trend in researching foreign language acquisition in specific populations. A strength of the methods used include external ELT experts coding selected segments, and coding decisions, which were refined through negotiated agreement. Procedures for piloting, participant communication, and transcription are described clearly, supporting credibility and traceability. Overall, methodology of the thesis is very clear and strong.

### **Findings**

Findings are organized around concrete classroom variables (pace, transitions, auditory load, group work, task design). Participant voice is central; frequency displays help readers navigate the salience of issues across groups. The chapter treats disagreements between perspectives with care and shows why particular task features (e.g., unsupported listening; rapid switching) can be demanding for some learners. I think it is important the author shows where learners, parents, and teachers agree and where they differ (for example, pace and type of support) and shows why some tasks are hard (listening without visual support; fast switching between steps). Finally, the findings indicate why teaching assistant can be an invaluable communication and planning support for students with ASD.

### **Discussion and implications for practice**

The discussion clearly answers all research questions directly and highlights the heterogeneity among autistic learners. It notes a salient tension—high willingness to communicate in some contexts despite anxiety—and treats it cautiously as an observation that merits future investigation rather than a mechanism established by the present data. The thesis proposes a four-part model that integrates classroom environment and management, the nuanced roles of teaching assistants together with assessment and family cooperation, language activities (in line with CEFR 2020 categories), and language systems with topics. System-level constraints (timetable, room allocation, class size) are acknowledged explicitly, which increases the realism of the guidance for schools.

### **Final statement**

The thesis shows that the author has adequate level of theoretical as well as empirical knowledge and skills expected from candidate for habilitation. The habilitation thesis makes a substantive and original contribution to scientific knowledge at the interface of foreign language didactics and special education. It advances the field as it brings together four stakeholder perspectives within a coherent analytic design. It also translates qualitative evidence into a structured, teacher-facing model that is immediately usable bridges policy and practice and sets out a transparent methodological pathway (search strategy, codebook architecture, multi-voice triangulation) that can be replicated or extended by researchers and teacher-educators in the future. Together, these elements provide new findings of direct relevance to English language teaching and to special education supports, and they open a clear trajectory for cumulative, evidence-informed work in this scientific area.

### **Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)**

- 1) Your sample focuses on learners formerly diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Why did you anchor diagnostic terminology and inclusion criteria primarily in the DSM rather than the ICD? In your view, what are the key differences between DSM and ICD for this population, and do these differences carry any practical implications for foreign-language learning and classroom support (e.g., task design, assessment, accommodations)?

- 2) Many people with an Asperger's diagnosis identify as part of a neurodivergent minority. Should this self-identification be reflected explicitly in foreign-language teaching aims and methods? If so, how (e.g., learner agency, choice of texts/topics, interaction norms, assessment criteria, co-design of supports)? If not, why not?

## **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: October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Signature: