

**TEACHING ENGLISH ONLINE TO CHILDREN WHO ARE SOME  
DISABILITIES ON AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) AND DOWN  
SYNDROME AMID(DSA) IN THE PERIOD OF PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract**

The unparalleled circumstances brought about by the covid-19 pandemic have compelled both students and educators to adjust to novel routines and technological tools to satisfy the educational demands arising from this global health crisis. This case study examined a methodological intervention involving students at an English school catering to individuals with special needs in Manizales (Colombia). Our team, consisting of two university lecturers and seven pre-service educators, conducted online English classes for 17 students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and 13 with Down syndrome (DS). To achieve this, we applied the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) alongside an eclectic method that integrates strategies from three specific approaches: The Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) approach, the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children (TEACCH) model, and a behavioral management framework. The aim of this research was to assess the effect of implementing these strategies on the English language learning (ELL) process for ASD and DS students. We employed three data collection methods, which included two surveys directed at parents and a researcher's journal. The results revealed that: (a) the integration of diverse stimuli and methodological strategies from multiple approaches facilitated learning, (b) the incorporation of images and pictograms enhanced memory retention, (c) establishing clear routines encouraged the development of self-regulation skills, and (d) the challenges faced by families and students were transformed into opportunities. It was concluded that teaching English online to students with ASD and DS necessitates a deep understanding of their conditions and the implementation of appropriate strategies derived from an eclectic instructional model.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder; Down syndrome; special educational needs; English teaching; ICT; covid-19.

**Introduction**

The realm of special educational needs (SEN) has recently emerged as a pivotal component of the educational landscape in Colombia. Instructing the English language

to students with SEN represents both a challenge and a commitment for educational institutions, educators, support personnel, and all stakeholders engaged with this particular demographic. Consequently, it becomes imperative to investigate the most effective methodologies that facilitate SEN students' attainment of their maximum potential throughout the educational process. One efficacious instrument that may support this objective is a methodological adaptation entailing reasonable adjustments pertinent to English language learning (ELL) strategies, time management, behavioral management, and daily routines within the educational setting. The conception of establishing a project, termed Escuela de Inglés para Estudiantes con Necesidades Educativas Diversas (EINED), emerged from the pressing need to furnish a new opportunity for SEN students from diverse municipalities to learn a foreign language. Our objective is to adopt an instructional framework that integrates reasonable adjustments specifically designed for students diagnosed with Down syndrome (DS). The mission of EINED is to provide English language instruction online, employing an adapted methodology aimed at fostering the development of the four communicative competencies in students with DS. Initially, we had planned to conduct in-person classes; however, due to the unprecedented crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, our plans necessitated an unexpected redirection. Consequently, online English classes became the requisite response to this complex situation, compelling us to implement our methodology in a digital format. This transition has not only entailed the incorporation of the adapted methodology but has also required modifications to resources and materials through the application of technology. Instructing a foreign language to SEN students is intrinsically challenging, and addressing this undertaking in a virtual context introduces an additional layer of complexity.

### **Down Syndrome**

According to Amjad and Muhammad (2019), Down syndrome is defined as “a genetic disorder that impedes the motor, language, and cognitive abilities of an individual... This condition arises from an anomaly in chromosomes, specifically the presence of 47 chromosomes instead of the usual 46 for various reasons” (p. 128). Typically, Down syndrome is identified at a young age, either during prenatal assessments or shortly after birth. Most individuals with Down syndrome tend to be generally healthy. In certain instances, there may be associated mental health challenges that can result in a dual diagnosis, such as autism spectrum disorder, which affects approximately 10% of the global population with Down syndrome. Nonetheless, this percentage may vary based on the individual's country of residence. Those with Down syndrome can succeed in any academic setting, provided that appropriate accommodations are implemented. To ensure these modifications, Moreno and Tejada (2018) recommend centering classroom interventions on four key areas: the objectives, the methodology, the activities, and the assessment. Research has also

indicated that executive function (EF) influences the performance in math, reading, and literacy of both students with Down syndrome and their typically developing peers. Moreover, EF significantly enhances their capacity to engage with peers and to exhibit proper behavior while undertaking various tasks. Thus, understanding the connection between EF and academic success could aid in developing strategies to elevate educational outcomes for learners with Down syndrome (Will et al., 2016). Among our participants with Down syndrome, 3 students exhibit significant difficulties with oral communication, 4 demonstrate a lack of motivation to complete their assignments, and 5 are prone to distractions. Although the majority struggle with their working memory, effective visual aids enable them to remember vocabulary successfully; this underscores the necessity of incorporating such tools in every lesson.

### **Teaching Approaches**

This section examines three primary teaching methodologies: UDL, TEACCH, and ICT for SEN students. The subsequent models not only form the foundation of our experiences and the data analysis of our research, but they also illustrate the influence of combining these models on the learning journey of SEN students. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) The UDL framework highlights three essential principles: the reasons for learning, the content of learning, and the methods of learning. In alignment with this framework, CAST (2018) Guidelines propose three key pillars, each with distinct characteristics:

1. Multiple Means of Engagement, which signifies providing students with opportunities for self-motivation and self-regulation. This includes a variety of engagement options that enable students to actively participate based on their individual personalities, abilities, prior knowledge, cultural backgrounds, and neurological conditions.

2. Multiple Means of Representation, which addresses the need to offer diverse approaches that cater to students' unique learning styles. Presenting various ways to engage with the content is crucial for students to grasp concepts and their interrelations.

3. Multiple Means of Action and Expression, which involves fostering communication skills and executive functions. Therefore, considering the varying capacities of learners to articulate their knowledge, it is essential to offer them multiple avenues to showcase what they have learned.

### **Method**

This project emerges from a personal experience of both researchers and their students in a very specific context: the virtual English classes taught at EINED, which is an extension project from a public university in Manizales, Colombia. This qualitative case study intends not only to understand the significance of a variety of ELT methods and the students' reactions to them but also their role in improving the conditions of students with SEN when learning English. This is a case study because it

attempts to analyze a number of complex situations that may occur in their natural context in order to have a better appreciation of the facts.

Case studies allow for a comprehensive and natural depiction of participants, methodologies, and contexts (Crowe et al., 2011). Within these studies, data is gathered using diverse techniques to ensure a more comprehensive approach when analyzing the information obtained.

### **Findings**

The outcomes obtained from this case study emphasized the role of different strategies used in the online learning experience of students with DS. Secondly, the analysis of the data indicated that the students made progress in their executive function and self-regulation abilities through the application of diverse methodological strategies grounded in various approaches. Thirdly, the gathered data revealed that memory was enhanced through the incorporation of images and pictograms. Furthermore, the interpretation of the instruments indicated that establishing clear routines during lessons is an effective way to promote self-regulation skills. Lastly, insights from the three data collection methods illustrated how the initial ICT challenges faced by families and students transformed into long-term opportunities. more integrated perspective when interpreting the collected information.

### **Discussion**

As highlighted by Crowe et al. (2011), the central purpose of a case study is to analyze a situation thoroughly within its natural setting. Therefore, this case study aligns with this idea as various English teaching methodologies were evaluated concerning online ELT practices for students with DS. Initially, the challenge was to identify a specific English teaching method that catered to the needs of SEN learners based on their unique circumstances. Following the implementation of a diverse array of strategies rooted in various ELT methodologies, we contend that there is no singular optimal approach for instructing English to this particular demographic. Rather, we posit that an eclectic teaching strategy is essential to address SEN students in a comprehensive manner. This assertion can be substantiated by the three principles outlined in CAST (2018) guidelines, which include multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. Despite the challenges posed by DS in relation to learning, these students have the capability to enhance their English communicative skills, particularly in listening and speaking.

### **Conclusions**

Teaching English remotely to special educational needs (sen) students necessitates understanding their unique conditions and implementing appropriate adjustments to help them reach their maximum potential. In this methodological article, we explored a teaching framework aimed at proposing various strategies to enhance the learning of a foreign language (fl), foster emotional functioning (ef) and self-

regulation skills, and manage the behavior of students with developmental disorders (ds). We outlined several techniques from three perspectives: the 3Ps model, the TEACCH method, and a behavioral approach based on BG. While applying these strategies, we considered the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which we believe should serve as the foundation for teaching SEN students. We advocate for the aforementioned methods, recognizing the benefits that arise from their application. First, the 3Ps model assists DS students in alleviating anxiety due to its robust framework. Second, the TEACCH method offers a comprehensive array of classroom management techniques tailored to meet the needs of SEN learners. Third, the BG approach serves as an effective means of teaching students behavioral management skills. Therefore, we encourage our colleagues to explore a combination of different approaches that may prove advantageous for their SEN students across various developmental domains. Although we have identified some limitations, we have also observed positive results, which inspire us to provide a more effective teaching experience. This journey has contributed to our students' consistent advancement in foreign language acquisition (fll), ongoing engagement and support from their families, and a deeper understanding of DS conditions. Overall, the most important takeaway from this experience is that "educating SEN students with empathy, care, and dignity is essential to nurturing their motivation for self-betterment."

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