

Foreign language professors: pedagogical and didactic competencies to assist college students with Asperger Syndrome and Visual Difficulties

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Resumen

El presente proyecto es una investigación desarrollada en la Universidad Minuto de Dios, la cual surge como una preocupación en cuanto a la falta de procesos de enseñanza a estudiantes con necesidades educativas especiales, especialmente dificultades visuales y el síndrome de Asperger, mientras aprenden una lengua extranjera, en este caso inglés. El proyecto tiene como objetivo fundamental fortalecer las prácticas pedagógicas y didácticas para atender estudiantes con el síndrome de Asperger y dificultades visuales en la licenciatura en idioma extranjero inglés de la universidad Minuto de Dios. Además, esta propuesta presenta un enfoque cualitativo, con un tipo de investigación de corte descriptivo, empleando como técnicas entrevistas cualitativas y un grupo focal. Dentro de los resultados obtenidos se conoce cuántos estudiantes con necesidades educativas hay en el programa. Por otra parte, se logró identificar que los docentes no han recibido alguna formación especial y completa para atender este tipo de población con necesidades educativas especiales, sin embargo, autónomamente buscan la manera de incluirlos en los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje que se dan al interior del aula.

Palabras claves: Necesidades Educativas Especiales, Síndrome de Asperger, Dificultades visuales, inclusión, competencias de los profesores.

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Abstract

This project is a research carried out at the Universidad Minuto de Dios, which arises as a concern regarding the lack of teaching processes for students with special educational needs, especially visual difficulties, and Asperger's syndrome, while learning a foreign language, in this case, English. The project's main objective is to strengthen pedagogical and didactic practices to serve students with Asperger's syndrome and visual difficulties in the English foreign language degree of the University Minuto de Dios. In addition, this proposal presents a qualitative approach, with a type of descriptive research, using qualitative interviews and a focus group as techniques. Among the results obtained it is known how many students with educational needs are in the program, On the other hand, that teachers have not received any special training to address this type of population with special educational need. However, they autonomously look for ways to include them in the teaching and learning processes that occur within the classroom.

Keywords: Special Educational Needs, Asperger Syndrome, Visual difficulties, inclusion, teachers' competencies.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking off inclusive processes is a trend that engages schools in general. Nevertheless, it is crucial to have teachers who develop a level of special training to be able to serve students who present particular special educational needs. Preventing that they feel excluded, it is also essential to recognize that teachers develop a privileged and recognized work to carry out their teaching and learning process. But, it would be a little less complex if they have the tools to assist students with special educational needs, since it is a challenge that any teacher assumes when it comes to educating.

Taking into account the main topic of this research, the philosophy and the inclusion policies at Minuto de Dios University which state that the university: "it tends for an inclusive higher education that seeks the formation of social leaders and innovators, completely trained" (Page, 12). [our translation]. In that sense,

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the present project arose as a concern for the lack of effective teaching processes to assist students with special education needs. Particularly, students with Asperger's syndrome and visual difficulties while learning a foreign language, in this case, English.

On the other hand, taking into account the teacher's competencies, many teachers claimed that they did not receive specific knowledge and training to assist that type of population beyond having a career in the field of teaching. That situation can be a great difficulty in students with special educational needs since they may need teachers with knowledge of Braille system and good strategies to carry out an excellent learning process.

Likewise, this proposal is important since it expects to promote awareness, inclusion, and interest in teachers who teach these students, considering fairness and equality in classrooms, and address this characteristic that affects young people to improve their educational processes. Moreover, this proposal can be very useful for higher education institutions, since it gives insights that would allow them to analyze pedagogical proposals of teaching and learning to carry out good processes at the level of educational inclusion. Thus, this study proposed as a fundamental objective the strengthening of pedagogical and didactic practices to assist students with Asperger's Syndrome and Visual Difficulties in the Bachelor in Foreign Language English at Minuto de Dios university.

Otherwise, it is fundamental to this research to show some studies which are similar and support it. Among which the following are highlighted as most relevant for this proposal:

Qualitative research carried out by Pegalajar (2014), called "Importancia de la Actividad Formativa Del Docente en Centros de Educación Especial analyzed the training and professional development of the teacher in specific special centers in Andalucía to assist students with special needs.

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As an important aspect of the previous study, it found that the researcher made an emphasis on the teacher's training to be able to assist students with Special Educational Needs. He could show that the teachers in that context were qualified to face the challenge which was to assist a specific population.

Contrarily, Bonora and Romero (2015), carried out qualitative research called Síndrome de Asperger: el Uso de las estrategias pedagógicas en la Clase de inglés. It was developed in La Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata Argentina. They examined the lack of necessary tools to carry out the process with students who have Asperger Syndrome. Besides, The authors found that administrative teaching staff students and parents need to have a training process, to support the educational processes of students with Asperger syndrome.

Taking into account that this study shows how it was carried out in the process with a student who has Asperger. It is possible to make a reflection about the importance that teachers need to be qualified to assist students with that condition.

Likewise, another relevant study was developed by Sánchez (2018), he examined the strengths and weaknesses of the procedures that teachers used to follow up a student with poor eyesight.

Considering the required strategies to teach students with low vision, teachers do not feel secure to face this type of challenge, but those students cannot be excluded from educational contexts. However, we think that despite teachers may not be qualified to assist students with Special Needs, they have the opportunity to look for information about the implementation of strategies to teach them. Regarding the author in this study, who shared how was his experience in the learning process despite his condition as a person who has low vision.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Special Educational Needs - SEN

Special educational needs - SEN are learning difficulties that show that each student has individual characteristics that make them different. But also those special characteristics make them participants of the learning process. According to Frederickson and Cline (2002), "special educational needs are taken to the outcome of an interaction between the individual characteristics of learners and the educational environments in which they are learning" (Page, 24).

In accordance with Carvajalino, Acuña, Paez, & Leal (2016), there are three types of Special Educational Needs which are:

- The individual educational needs refer to the different abilities, interests, levels, rhythms and learning styles that mediate the learning process, before which, from a lovingly inclusive path, the teacher can become even more sensitive to the internalization that requires understanding that all of your students are unique, diverse and different [...].
- Transitory special educational needs are learning difficulties that arise in the student during the period of schooling and demand differentiated attention and greater educational resources than those of other peers of his age need; these can be overcome in the classroom.
- The permanent special educational needs are those that a person presents not only during their student period but throughout their lives, associated with intellectual, sensory disabilities, motor, perceptive, expressive, or genetic alterations. As consequences of these, there is an inability to perform the vital functions and relationship, which require the attention of specialists and appropriate material to be addressed. In this category, there are visual impairment (blindness), hearing impairment (deafness), motor disability (cerebral palsy), intellectual disability and multi-facial or associated disabilities [our translation] (Pages, 61-62).

Asperger's Syndrome

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Asperger syndrome is considered a disorder derived from a neurological difficulty. This disorder affects different aspects of the person who suffers it, such as intelligence, interaction, socialization and communication with other people. For American Psychiatric Association (2000), “Asperger Syndrome (AS) is characterized as a neurological disorder that affects children with average intelligence, affecting particularly their ability to socialize and communicate effectively with others” (Page, 32).

Visual difficulties

Students with visual difficulties present a great struggle to understand texts. Teachers must be aware that this difficulty provokes a slow learning process. According to Dickson (2013), “students with VPD (Visual Processing Disorder) [...] experience difficulty in processing visual information. They may letters and numbers or lose their place while reading. VPD have an impact on students’ learning in both literacy and numeracy” (Paragraph, 4).

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusive education is a fundamental aspect of education because it allows the access to educational facilities to people who have a disability, learning difficulties or who are in a vulnerable state. This implies that inclusion is a process that promotes the right to education for all, without considering any condition. For Sarto & Venegas (2009), "educational inclusion is directly related to the concept of " education for all ", which aims to ensure access to basic education, which should not be assumed as a privilege of a few but as a right of all " (Page, 35) [Our translation]

COMPETENCIES

Competencies are composed of cognitive aspects, including the skills and abilities that people develop and which allow them to achieve goals in different fields. For Cano (s.f), “the competencies contain or integrate resources (knowledge, skills, and skills), but they go beyond, orchestrating them. Therefore, we

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must emphasize the applicable component, the contextualized character of the competencies” (Page, 20).

[Our translation].

Teachers' competencies

Teachers must be specially trained with excellent skills that allow them to impart their knowledge satisfactorily. Furthermore, through their educational practice, they are capable of developing critical and intellectual processes that allow them to improve and acquire new competencies. In accordance with Arnaiz (2013), “the training should be aimed at the creation of a professional who reflects on their practice within an educational organization that actively collaborates to improve their competence and that of the center and that acts as a critical intellectual of the ethical dimensions of their profession” (Page, 56). [Our translation]

METHODOLOGY

The project was carried out based on a qualitative approach, with a type of descriptive research, using techniques such as qualitative interviews and focus groups.

In the case of the interviews, these were conducted in order to investigate and search for detailed and true information about the problem identified in this investigation. Likewise, it demonstrated reliable results and valid conclusions from the participants.

As for the focus group, it was carried out in order to address and complement information that could not be obtained from the interviews conducted.

In order to carry out the investigation, a process consisting of several steps was developed, as follows:

First, to identify the population that consisted of the seven teachers of the English foreign language degree of the University Minuto de Dios, who were the main protagonists in this research.

Second, to design the two interviews, one for the *oficina de primer año* and *oficina de inclusion* of the university and one for the participants, where information on the number of students with special educational

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needs in the program was obtained, in addition, to know if the teachers had had experiences with students who present a special educational need.

Thirdly, to do the focus group, in which it was investigated, more in-depth, the pedagogical and didactic competencies that professors possess to help students with visual difficulties and Asperger's syndrome.

Finally, a voice recording session to get information from the professors.

RESULTS

In summary, we will present the analyzed results of the interview with the teachers and the focus group. Taking into account the analysis of the instruments and the results obtained some categories were developed to explain better the results in this research. So the type of analysis consisted of grounded theory, according to Noble & Mitchell (2016) explain that grounded theory is "categories and analytic codes developed from data" (Page, 1).

The categories developed were:

Teacher training

According to the person in charge of the area of inclusion, she commented that "At Minuto de Dios University there is a program of accompaniment and permanence in charge or promoting students welfare called inclusion. This program addresses both physical, intellectual, autism spectrum disorder and sensory disabilities such as hearing and visual disabilities".

Teachers stated that in their teaching experience at Minuto de Dios University, they have had students with special educational needs such as visual difficulties, Asperger Syndrome, and motor disability (Table 1).

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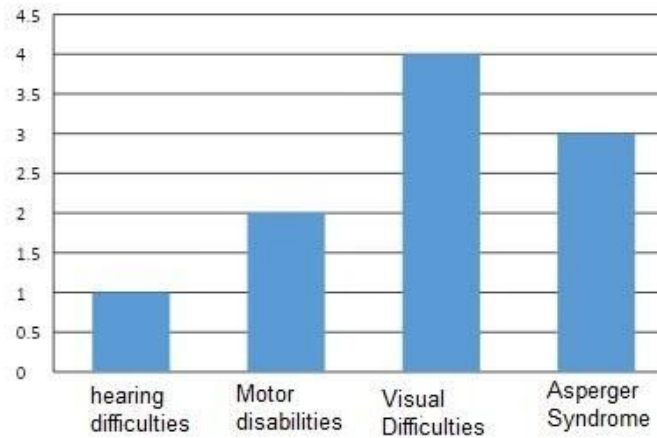


Tabla. 1. Types of SEN students in bachelor in foreign languages

They also affirmed that since their training as as teachers (undergraduates), they never received any training from the institution to attend students with special educational needs. The teachers also commented that the orientation they received in the degree in Foreign Languages, in case of having met students with special educational needs in their classrooms, is not enough to achieve teaching actions with those students, they have only been in some talks and students identification trainings where they were superficially taught how to address them depending on the cases they face. However, there was not teacher training with a special protocol that contains strategies to deal directly with this type of population, besides that, it does not entail a type of special and constant accompaniment in the classrooms to these students.

According to *oficina de primer año*,:

The support provided by the office of accompaniment with special educational students to the teacher in charge is only to provide a few tools for people with visual difficulties such as asking that the student with visual difficulties be allowed to use the cell phone, recording an audio of the class, take pictures of the notes on the board, and support for students to suggest a screen reader called ALL READER, so that the student can scan books and copies of the books. At the beginning of the year, the teachers receive a list with the students with special education needs that they will have in their classes, and the area of *primer año* gives them some strategies to put them into practice with people with visual difficulties such as presenting exams

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with the Braille system and other strategies in which teachers make some adaptations to the educational material.

Besides, with Autism, there is no specific support, because only the area of inclusion is responsible for carrying out an academic follow-up in the subjects, but it is not a matter of dialogue with the teacher about what the student's qualities are, suddenly if the student feels uncomfortable if he has to leave class, allow him to leave.

For this reason, they affirmed that they are not sufficiently trained to attend students with special educational needs, practically they empirically seek training to be able to meet the expectations of students with special educational needs.

Teaching strategies

However, from their empirical experience, teachers affirmed that they have been allowed to design themselves different methodologies and/or strategies to work with students with special educational needs, such as:

- Finding a special tutor for the student during classes. (PLICLE 01)
- Seeking accompaniment in the *inclusion office* and always ask the student what strategies he could use to help him in his process. (PLICLE 02)
- With the help of a Braille printer, translating the material they will have in class. Performing some computer exams. Using the YOUS text reader program so that students can listen to the readings they propose in class. People with Asperger Syndrome always seek to give clear and step-by-step instructions. (PLICLE 03)
- For the students with Asperger's Syndrome, asking them a few questions and letting them do his work individually. (PLICLE 04)

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- Understanding what kind of rhythm and learning style the students with Asperger's Syndrome have, in this way, becoming more flexible when they need it. With students with visual difficulties, including special educational material, with a fairly large print. (PLICLE 05)
- Doing activities depending on the pace of work, maintaining the requirement. Allowing them to work individually. Getting the group to know your condition and trying to help them without bothering them too much. (PLICLE 06)
- And finally, modifying activities according to the needs of the students. (PLICLE 07)

Teaching Competencies

All the previous teaching strategies that teachers have been able to use, have allowed them to start developing competencies to teach their area of knowledge (English).

- The ability to make dynamic classes and more flexible so that they can also integrate them with the other students, in which they will always have tools and support plans in case the course of the class becomes destabilized, they will always look for ways to focus the class without setback.
- The innate search for strategies to manage the class and work with this type of population effectively,
- The capacity of observation, in which they analyze which are the capacities that students have for fulfilling the objectives of the class.
- Autonomy and self-training so teachers provide the necessary tools in class to be competent in the workplace. Searching for information on teaching and pedagogical techniques to work with students.
- Use of technological tools such as "YOU" text reader, and also braille printers to adapt class materials.
- Awareness of delivering affordable material to visually impaired students, also for people with Asperger Syndrome.

However, teachers consider that the ideal pedagogical and didactic competencies to work with these students, particularly with students with Asperger's syndrome and Visual difficulties, according to them, are:

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- Primarily, psycho-pedagogical competencies, since these problems are most seen at the health level rather than the pedagogical problem, so the ideal goal would be the integration of psychology and pedagogy disciplines.
- Creativity to adapt resources by creating material designs according to the student's needs, for example, the material with Braille system.

Curricular suggestions

The teachers gave to the English foreign language Bachelor's curriculum, the following suggestions:

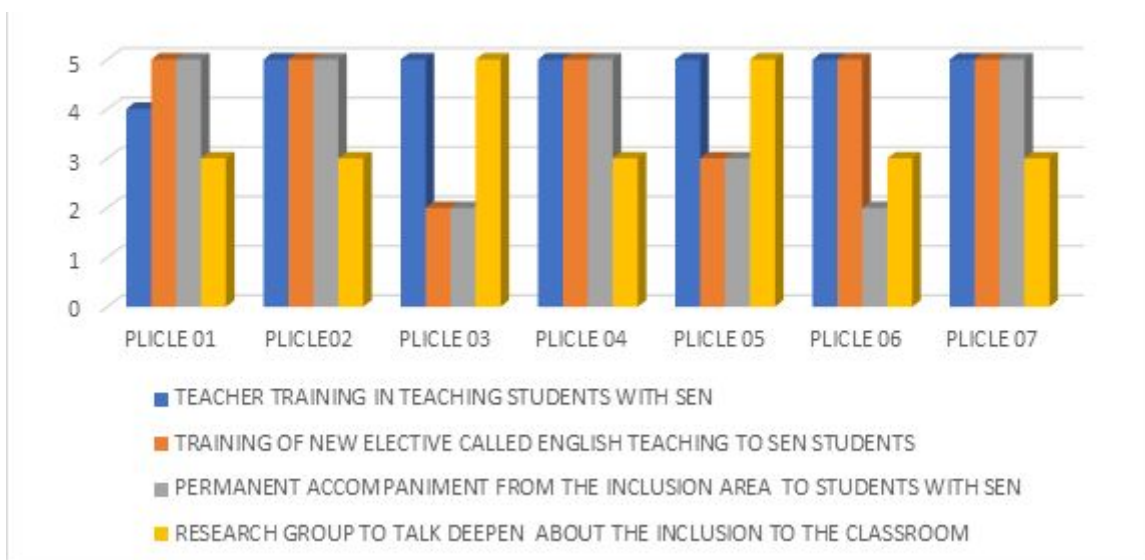


Table 2: Suggestions to the curriculum of the Bachelor in foreign language teaching

In general, the most of them suggested an elective course for undergraduate students whose main concerns had be focused on special educational needs, with linked activities and with actions in the practicum field.

Most teachers also suggested providing teacher training and development spaces where they are taught strategies to attend students with special educational needs.

Some others also suggested the creation of a research line within a research group concerning the work of this problem, in which both students and people with special educational needs are active participants.

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DISCUSSION

The English foreign language degree program is synchronized with students with SEN, teachers in charge and the inclusion area of the university. The accompaniment focuses only on students with special educational needs, while the process of accompaniment and/or teacher training is not specific to face this situation. According to UNESCO (2005) cited by Álvarez L., (2011), "Inclusive Education implies more than integrating the student into the regular education system, it is an approach that seeks to transform educational systems and learning environments to respond to the diversity of learners, in order that all students participate " (UNESCO, 2005).

Teachers should acquire psycho-pedagogical skills, resource adaptability teaching and skills to include people with autism spectra, in addition to constant therapeutic support from the area of inclusion in the classroom.

Because of what was found in the interviews, the teachers try to stealthily communicate with SEN learners and accept any type of behaviors that are normal in their disorders so that they do not drop out of their classes. According to a study by Lee (2018), "[...] in addition to advisory and evaluation capacity to achieve the highest qualitative growth within the class. The teacher of students with special educational needs more experience and more training than regular student-teacher" (Page 202). [our translation].

According to the interview with the representative of the inclusion area, "it is not a matter of speaking with the teacher about what the qualities of the student are, suddenly if the student feels uncomfortable and wants to leave the class, the teacher then should allow him to do so". It is for this reason that perhaps the teacher does not know whether to really act out in the situation, or to get out of a particular protocol and get involved in it.

According to Lee as cited by Vélez, Tárraga, Fernández & Sanz (2018), he says that the teaching staff does not continuously access training and updating services related to the care of people with special

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educational needs, which aggravates the service situation that can provide a specialized and priority treatment required by this group of people. The situation that arises due to the lack of an offer of higher education associated with teaching that integrates within the curriculum mesh guidelines for the care of people with special educational needs. (Page 146).[our translation]

The tools provided by the *oficina de primer año* are just a few strategies given to students for overcoming situations themselves in class. The *oficina de primer año*, explicitly only provide teachers with some guidelines, tools, or essential strategies to begin teaching and learning processes with students who present a special need for education. In the case of students with visual difficulties, the teacher in charge is only to give a few tools for people with visual difficulties such as asking to be allowed to student with visual difficulties make use of the cell phone, recording an audio of the class, take pictures of the notes on the board. It should be noted that these types of strategies, although they are workable, they really make these people look for ways of defending themselves, without exerting any effort to include them directly with the teacher. This is how a transformation is sought from educational policies to eliminate this institutional gap.

CONCLUSIONS

- For inclusion to be part of the educational community, many reforms to educational policies, articulation of processes, policies, diagnostic efforts and pedagogical equipment in the institutional educational project (PEI) are needed in this case by modifying the study plans for really including people with special educational needs if in these aspects each educative institution, teachers just will do what they can do depending of the limitations and te inclusion educations would not have an innovation and can be useful to students with special educational needs.
- Despite this situation, we will be able to rescue from this research that although teachers are not fully trained to serve a student with special educational needs, they somehow look for a way to learn in a self-taught way and gradually acquire their skills to help students with special educational

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needs, but it should be borne in mind that teachers need the training in order to face inclusive actions that really impact the educational processes of this type of community, but not before also having an accompaniment and guidance from the office of inclusion within the classes. The institutions have to be promote all necessary tools to the teachers can comply their function in a successfully way with that type of students, not is just the obligation of the teachers comply with this functions, the institutions must give the enough support to teachers trying to invest in better quality in the education that are offers to the community.

- The fields among students with educational needs, teacher training in the training of students with SEN and the accompaniment of inclusion are not fully integrated and must be integrated to generate a good learning process. The difference will begin to be noticed when the articulation of processes is effectively noticed and thus achieve the academic objectives as such the universities have marked in the field of inclusion. Primordially, to the things can to be successful not just is the responsibility of the institution and the teacher, and also the family, physiology and the staff must give a support to this students since all social context can work together to can see the difference in the education of those students will be totally evident when these students can involucrate in the society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further research, this topic needs to be more explored. Our research just presents a few aspects related to the populations chosen who are students with Asperger's syndrome and Visual difficulties. However, it is possible other students who decide to do research take this project as a model to propose new things to contribute to improving inclusive processes.

For instance:

- To investigate specific details about how is the process to create the materials to teach English to students who have Asperger's syndrome and Visual difficulties.

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- To start a project that develops a plan in accompaniment with the inclusion office at Minuto de Dios to develop different workshops. In which teachers learn to design some strategies, materials, and didactic activities to teach students who present Asperger syndrome and Visual difficulties.
- To present a project that shows the possibility to create a subject about Inclusion or teaching of students with special educational needs at Minuto de Dios.
- Besides, it is possible to investigate how to adapt materials that are already made to students who present another type of special educational need when they decide to start superior studies.

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