

PROFILING OF A HIGH-FUNCTIONING ASD BOY: A FOCUS ON LANGUAGE ABILITIES

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Abstract: *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a condition in which individuals may display a degree of deficiency which varies widely. Those at the less severe end of the spectrum are commonly referred to as having high-functioning autism (HFA) with cognitive abilities ranging from average to above-average intelligence and good command of language. This paper focuses on a case study which aims to represent the characteristics of an HFA Malay boy with a focus on his language abilities. This is a small section of a bigger case study which investigated three Malay HFA children on their English language performances. During the data collection stage, spontaneous speech interactions in English were conducted with the child. The profiling of this Malay boy, which was included in the researchers' previous article in 2019 with the source of interview from the father, and in an earlier article in 2018; however, was quite short. This paper describes in detail his language features that qualify him to be in this category. This is a unique case with uncommon instance of a Malaysian-born, Malaysian-raised boy acquiring L1 English with a foreign accent. The sources of the description came from interviews with the father and his two English teachers. It hopes to contribute to an increase of autism awareness and acceptance among these children's parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers, as well as the Malaysian society at large so that more support and encouragement may be provided.*

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), High-Functioning Autism (HFA), First Language (L1)*

Introduction

The number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is increasing and this has become a significant health issue globally. Statistics released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention USA (CDC) in 2021 reported that about one in 44 children aged 8 years (or 23.0 per 1000 children) were found with ASD in the United States (Maenner et al., 2021), an increase of one in 54 children aged 8 years (or 18.5 per 1000 children) (Maenner et al., 2020), and one in 59 children aged 8 years (or 16.8 per 1000 children) (Baio et al., 2018). A report by World Health Organization (2013) estimated that, about one in 160 children worldwide has ASD. In Malaysia, a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health (2016) revealed that the prevalence of failed MCHAT (suspected autism) is 1.6% (16 per 1000), that is higher compared to 0.6% (6 per 1000) in the feasibility study conducted in 2005¹.

The increasing number of children with ASD in mainstream schools in Malaysia, particularly among children between 7 and 12 years of age has raised concerns about the awareness of autism among teachers and the knowledge, skills, and effective methods that teachers can adopt or adapt when dealing with autistic children in mainstream classrooms (Hasnah Toran et al., 2016; Hasnah Toran et al., 2010; Saroya Yahya, Melor Md. Yunus & Hasnah Toran, 2013). This is because, most children with ASD between the ages of 7 and 12 are typically placed in mainstream classrooms due to their intellectual abilities that range from average to above average, as measured by their IQ (Ozonoff, Dawson & McPartland, 2015; Sansosti, Powell-Smith & Cowan, 2010).

Autism Spectrum Disorder and The Varied Spectrum

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a wide-ranging term referring to a set of neurodevelopmental disorders characterised by impairment specifically in two main areas: i) deficits in social communication and social interaction, and ii) restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Attwood, 2015). ASD is a clinical condition of mental disorder included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) published by American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 2013. It is a DSM-5 disorder involving the previous DSM-IV autistic disorder (autism), Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, Rett's disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (APA, 2013; Sivanesom, 2014). ASD may affect the lifestyle of individuals and families and may pose economic challenges to the family and the country (Hasnah Toran, 2014).

Since ASD is a spectrum condition, children with ASD may display a degree of deficiency which varies widely. The disability may exhibit a wide range of characteristics, varying from very severe to very mild (Frith, 2003; Sansosti et al., 2010; Wing, 1998). At the very severe end of the spectrum, children with autism were referred to as classic or Kanner's autism. These children may be non-verbal, have intellectual disabilities, and are easily distinguishable by exhibitions of repetitive behaviour such as hand flapping or body rocking (Frith, 2003; Sansosti et al., 2010; Wing, 1998). At the other extreme end is another group of children with autism, whose cognitive capabilities range from average to above average, and whose language skills are within the normal capacity (Attwood, 1998, 2007, 2015; Ozonoff et al., 2015; Sansosti et al., 2010; Williams, 2001).

This group of children with "milder autism" may exhibit odd social mannerisms, a long-winded pedantic style of communication, and rare or unique special interests (Attwood, 1998, 2007, 2015; Toro, 2008). Due to their obsessive interest in a favourite subject or area of expertise and

their unusually sophisticated vocabulary as well as their adult-like formal and pedantic speaking style (i.e., too worried about details of grammar and correct rules), these children have been colloquially labelled as “little professors” (Baron-Cohen, 2002; Eigsti et al., 2011; Ozonoff et al., 2015; Sansosti et al., 2010; Williams, 2001). They usually fail to detect that their listeners may be bored with the subject of their conversation (Baron-Cohen, 2002). Traditionally, such children were referred to as having high-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger syndrome (AS) in the previous DSM-IV (Attwood, 2007, 2015; Sansosti et al., 2010). The term “high-functioning” refers to ASD individuals with verbal and non-verbal IQ of above 70 (Gillberg et al., 2001; Koyama et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2009; Winner, 2002). It is also defined as “having normal intelligence and fairly good command of language” (Ozonoff et al., 2015, p.5). Additionally, Nason (2014, p.137) refers to high-functioning individuals as having “good expressive speech, fair to good receptive understanding and fair ability to function independently in their daily settings.”

However, in the current DSM-5, the terms AS and HFA have been substituted with a new diagnostic classification that is ASD Level 1, precisely, those without accompanying intellectual or language impairment (Attwood, 2015; Ozonoff et al., 2015).

Language Peculiarities in High-Functioning ASD Children

The presence of distinctive linguistic characteristics has been consistently observed in children with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and High-Functioning Autism (HFA), as documented by numerous scholars and researchers. Hans Asperger, a Viennese paediatrician who is credited with the eponymous diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, was cited by Attwood (2007, 2015) for his observations on atypical language abilities. These observations encompassed challenges in conversational skills, distinctive patterns of speech intonation or rhythm, and unconventional language development trajectories, such as early or delayed onset. Asperger (1944), as quoted in Attwood (2007, 2015), further noted that certain youngsters displayed a tendency to communicate in a manner like that of adults, employing an extensive lexicon and constructing sentences of considerable complexity.

In the year 1989, Peter Szatmari and his colleagues recognised peculiar speech characteristics that require the presence of a minimum of two of the following criteria (Szatmari, Bartolucci, & Bremner, 1989). This academic study examines six distinct communication patterns: (1) irregularities in inflection, (2) excessive verbosity, (3) insufficient verbal output, (4) absence of coherence in discourse, (5) idiosyncratic vocabulary usage, and (6) repetitive speech patterns.

Regarding the diagnostic criteria, Gillberg, Gillberg, Rastam, and Wentz (2001) identified a distinct pattern of language abilities in their classification. They stipulated that a diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) and High-Functioning Autism (HFA) requires the presence of at least three of the following speech and language characteristics. There are several characteristics associated with atypical language development in individuals: (1) delay in language acquisition, (2) the use of language that appears to be flawless on the surface, (3) the utilisation of formal or excessively mature language, (4) the presence of abnormal pitch, loudness, intonation, or prosody, and (5) difficulties in understanding and interpreting both literal and implicit meanings.

Frith (2003) posits that children diagnosed with (ASD) exhibit distinct patterns of speech in comparison to their typically developing counterparts, particularly in relation to the acquisition and comprehension of language. It is widely acknowledged that issues pertaining to pragmatics

are commonly observed as a pervasive characteristic of autism. It appears that individuals with (ASD) exhibit poorer levels of pragmatic skills, regardless of their proficiency in syntax or semantics.

While one of the diagnostic criteria for Asperger Syndrome (AS) indicates the absence of speech delay, there is a lack of clarity regarding whether early language acquisition in infants with AS is comparable to typically developing (TD) children. The diverse range of ASD is also characterised by a vast array of language acquisition capabilities. Children who are classified as high-functioning on the autism spectrum typically exhibit more advanced language skills and demonstrate faster language acquisition, whereas those classified as low-functioning may experience delays in gaining language skills. Simultaneously, there exist individuals with ASD who lack verbal communication abilities and remain non-verbal throughout their lifetimes. Frith (2003) highlighted an instance in which a youngster exhibited a lack of language until the introduction of a computerised communication device, which enabled successful utilisation and expression in that particular scenario. In addition, there exist children diagnosed with ASD who have a speech pattern characterised by the repetition of words or phrases, commonly referred to as echolalia. Individuals often engage in the act of repeating a speech they have heard without comprehending its meaning, so exhibiting a lack of ability to generate spontaneous communication.

The literature has extensively recognised that persons diagnosed with High-Functioning Autism (HFA) may exhibit intact language form and structure (Sansosti et al., 2010; Vulchanova, Talcott, Vulchanov, Stankova et al., 2012), or maybe have seemingly intact language skills (Twachtman-Cullen, 1998). Scholars have commonly referred to the language of children with (ASD) as “little professor” due to their remarkable command of vocabulary, particularly in specialised domains of interest, and their tendency to employ a formal speaking style. The aforementioned studies (Attwood, 2007, 2015; Eigsti et al., 2011; Myles & Simpson, 2002; Baron-Cohen et al., 2005) indicate that children with certain characteristics have a tendency to engage in extensive and detailed discussions regarding their areas of interest. The individual's areas of interest encompass a wide range of subjects, including trains, vacuum cleaners, engines, and dinosaurs (Sansosti et al., 2010). According to Baron-Cohen et al. (2005), individuals with this particular inclination may exhibit a preoccupation not alone with machinery, but also with natural phenomena, including weather patterns, mountain building, planetary motion, and the categorization of reptiles. Nevertheless, as a result of their intense focus on their areas of interest and their tendency to be excessively wordy, these individuals often overlook the fact that their audience has lost interest in the topic being discussed. Hence, the interaction with these youngsters will predominantly use unidirectional communication as opposed to reciprocal communication (Attwood, 2007, 2015; Baron-Cohen et al., 2005; Sansosti et al., 2010). Attwood (2007, 2015) introduced several more features to describe the language exhibited by these individuals. These include inconsistencies in inflection, excessive or insufficient speech output, a lack of coherence in discourse, unique word usage, and repeated speech patterns.

In terms of speech patterns, children diagnosed with AS and HFA may exhibit aberrant speech characteristics in comparison to typically developing (TD) individuals of similar age. The individual's manner of communication typically exhibits a formal and pedantic style, characterised by an excessive preoccupation with adhering to grammatical rules and minutiae (Attwood, 2007, 2015; Baron-Cohen, 1988; Durrleman & Zufferey, 2009; Gillberg et al., 2001;

Neihart, 2000; Plauche Johnson & Myers, 2007; Ramberg et al., 1996; Sansosti et al., 2010; Wing, 1991).

Methodology

Participant

This paper is part of a larger qualitative research case study of children with high-functioning autism, in which purposeful sampling was employed. A thorough search for Malay children between 7 and 11 years old who have been diagnosed with high-functioning ASD by a child psychiatrist either at Malaysian government hospitals or private hospitals was conducted. These children would have to be those who acquire English as their first language, with Malay as their home language. These children also had to be those who were in mainstream schools. English was confirmed as their first language through letters issued by their respective psychiatrists, and the interviews conducted with their parents. The search was also focused on children living in the northern region of Malaysia, and was conducted at hospitals, intervention centres, through social media (e.g., Facebook), friends, networking, etc. This study, which formed a portion of a larger study, focused only on one Malay boy with high-functioning autism who met the criteria mentioned.

Ethics

Approval from the university ethical committee (UKM/PPI/111/8/ JEP-2016-517) was obtained before the research was conducted. Written consent for the participation of the child and her parents was obtained from the parents of the child.

Profiling of Aarif

When the data collection started in November 2015, Aarif was 10 years and 4 months old. He is a Malay boy who was born and raised in Jitra. He speaks English fluently with an American accent as his first language. Both his parents are educators. At home, the Malay language is the first home language, and English is the second. Aarif started producing his first words before the age of one year, just like other typically developing children, but preferred speaking in English than Malay when communicating until he was six years old. He was reported to have been watching the Playhouse Disney Channel (now Disney Junior) since he was very young, which is believed to be the main source of his acquisition of English language and American accent.

The Father's Account of Aarif

His Language

Aarif was recounted to utter his first word when he was ten months old, his two words when he was twelve months old, his three words when he was fifteen months old and a full sentence when he was two years old. The father described his language development as the same with other typically developing children as he was able to speak in a full sentence when he was two; however, he noticed his peculiarity as he spoke only in English with an American accent and that he had a very high vocabulary, as he used a large size of words. By three years old, he was already speaking in English fluently. When visiting the zoo at the age of three, he was reported to utter "*Look, the tortoise is camouflaging*" when he saw the animal was trying to hide in the grass. The father also recalled an incident at his niece's wedding in which Aarif was impressed by the bride's room decoration in which he exclaimed, "*This room is awesome! It's made in shades of purple.*"

Since the home language was dominantly Malay, and communication with his other siblings were also dominantly in Malay, the situation when Aarif spoke merely English was a bit odd. Although English was spoken as the second language at home, the parents did not speak English with an accent like him. He was reported to watch the cartoon programmes on *Playhouse Disney Channel* such as *Mickey Mouse Club House*, *Little Einstein*, *Word World* and *Higgly Town Heroes*. He also used to watch *Barney* on the DVDs. The father recounted his routine before he went to bed, which occurred when he was four. Due to his passion for spelling new words that he learned through *Word World*, he would spell out words before he went to sleep.

At the time, attempts to communicate with Aarif in Malay would be replaced with his feedback, entirely in English. However, instructions given to him in Malay would be followed, which indicated that he understood the Malay language, but refused to use it. Due to his refusal to speak in Malay, the parents then had to speak more English than Malay to Aarif in order for them to have better communication with him. The Malay language was still used with Aarif, as the parents wanted him to be able to speak Malay as well, although English seemed to be the language that he preferred more. When he was outside the house, he would speak only in English with people he met regardless of whether they understood him or not. This situation, in which Aarif spoke exclusively in English, lasted until when he was six years old.

Aarif started his pre-school when he was four. At this time, he was also able to memorize parts of dialogues from the programmes he watched on television. He chose to speak in English with his teachers and friends in pre-school even though everyone else spoke Malay at the time. The language environment was quite peculiar in his class as he was the only one who spoke English in class, even though everyone else spoke in Malay, be it with his friends or his teachers. He began to speak in Malay during his final year of preschool, which was believed to be due to his efforts to be included well in school. Nevertheless, at the time, his Malay language sounded as if it was directly translated from English to Malay, which sounded a bit unusual. Even the jokes that he used to tell were in English, which he grabbed from his favourite programmes on television. At the time, Aarif was also able to memorize dialogues that he watched and heard from the television.

When Aarif started schooling in Year 1, his Malay language had improved although he still preferred English better. His social skills seemed to improve as he began to understand that he could speak English only with people who could understand the language too. This was shown in his communication with strangers as he would start the conversation in Malay, unlike before. When he started schooling, he would try to use the Malay language with his friends in school and he would be so happy to interact with the teachers, who could speak English with him. Aarif would usually be so eager to meet his parents in the evening as he could not wait to talk to them in English.

At the time of the interview, the father stated that Aarif had mentioned that he did not like the Malay subject at school, which was believed to be due to his struggle with the language. Aarif seemed to speak clear, formal English, he did not use the particle “lah” usually added at the end of a sentence by a Malaysian when speaking English or better known as Manglish.

Regarding his schooling, Aarif’s parents were also informed by the teachers that Aarif spoke English during English class but spoke in Malay language during other classes. His performance in school was great, as his listening, reading, and speaking skills were good, though he did not enjoy writing and preferred to provide oral answers in class. During his final examination in

Year 5, he scored the highest for English papers, 84 for Paper 1 and 92 for Paper 2. However, copying notes from the whiteboard was a problem for him, as he rarely finished it. Inspections of his exercise books would show incomplete work and this occurred not only for English, but for other subjects too.

At the time of the interview, his communication with his friends in school seemed to be better as he even used the Malay language in Kedah dialect when talking to his friends; for example, “hang” meaning you and “aku” meaning I. His ability in using the Kedah dialect with his friends had made him better accepted among his friends.

Diagnosis, Sensory Issues and Intervention

Aarif was brought to Penang General Hospital when he was in Year 1. He was referred to the hospital after his teachers’ complaint of his struggles in school. His main problems at the time were, in particular, poor self-management, lack of social skills, odd behaviour, sensory problems, hyperactivity, and inability to finish his schoolwork. He was reported to not be able to cope with the school assembly, not able to adapt well in the classroom and also to the school environment. Going to the toilet and returning to the classroom was also a problem. Interactions with his school friends tended to be one-way rather than two-way communication. He refused to stand up and greet the teachers. He was described by the teachers as having a short attention span, and he also complained that he felt bored in school. Aarif was later diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome at the age of seven by a child psychiatrist. He was then tested on CTONI and received an IQ score of 143 which indicated an above average intelligence.

After the diagnosis, his parents learnt that Aarif’s problems arose due to his rigidity and sensory issues regarding sound and smell, behavioural issues, lack of social skills, and inability to communicate well with his friends and teachers which are characteristics of autism. They found out that he was struggling with the new school environment, the school rules, and the loud noise in school. His parents also found out that he had a high threshold for pain. He also encountered difficulties in balancing due to his sensory sensitivity too, which caused him not being able to ride a two-wheeled bicycle and having anxiety to go up and down the escalator.

He was then referred to an intervention centre in Penang by the child psychiatrist, which is an NGO. Aarif received an intervention programme to help him overcome his problems. Later, when Aarif was in Year 2, he went through an intervention programme at Sultanah Bahiyah General Hospital where he had several sessions of occupational therapy for his sensory issues and to improve his focus.

Schooling and Social Skills

Aarif was sent to a nursery when he was three years old and joined the pre-school which was located in the same place and owned by the same owner when he was four. Adapting to the pre-school was difficult initially as he was reported to snuggle under the table and bite the crayons and erasers. However, he was a fast learner as he could read when he was four, and it took effortless teaching to learn to read. He was already reading the encyclopaedias when he was five.

When Aarif started schooling in Year 1, he struggled a lot with the new environment. The big class size of 40 students per class was a problem as he met new teachers and friends, creating loud noise. According to his father, teaching him things that he had already learnt at pre-school, and through books and encyclopaedias made him complain of feeling bored and he was always

reported by the teachers to leave the class and go to the library on his own. His friends found him odd as he rarely stayed at his desk long and walked in the class, or left the class, and he did not have many friends at the time. This situation continued until when he was in Year 2; fortunately, it stopped when he was in Year 3. Earlier in school, Aarif was reported to be bullied by name-calling due to his odd behaviour and literal interpretation. The bullying incidents eventually reduced, although they happened occasionally at times.

When the interview took place, the father explained that Aarif had already improved a lot. He showed the efforts to socialize with his friends but because of his lack of social skills, he usually encountered problems when taking part in group activities. His social skills seemed to improve, and he had many friends who understood and accepted him well. His behavioural problem has reduced a lot although he would express his emotion occasionally by shouting whenever something went wrong.

Talents and Passions

When Aarif was four, he had a strong fascination for *Thomas and Friends*; a cartoon programme he watched on television, which he displayed through playing with the toys, drawing Thomas and friends, and talking about it for long hours. At times, he would walk while moving both hands like the wheels on *Thomas and Friends*. Later, before he started schooling in Year 1 until Year 5, he had a strong interest in *Angry Birds*. He displayed his interest by playing with the *Angry Birds* games toys, watching You Tubes, making the *Angry Birds*' sounds, drawing the *Angry Birds* characters, reading them on the internet, and was able to explain each of the characters in detail. He was able to make figurines of the *Angry Birds* which looked like factory-made models.

Apart from that, he has a talent in speaking as he often made his own videos that he recorded his action while playing with his figurine and making them, which he pretended as if he was making his own YouTube videos. When the interview was held in November 2016, Aarif started with a new passion, making the Pokemon characters, reading and watching them on the internet, and producing the models, in which he knew the exact details of each of the characters.

According to his father, Aarif did not have good skills in team sports or track and field sports. As such, he was sent to swimming classes and he could swim well. He also played archery and attended the taekwondo classes which helped him to improve his focus and to follow instructions.

The Teachers' Account of Aarif

Background Information

Two English teachers were interviewed for more information regarding Aarif. A female teacher, Ms Hanizah taught Aarif English throughout the year when he was in Year 4. The other was a male teacher, Mr Zain, who taught him English throughout the whole year in his Year 5. The interview with Ms Hanizah was done in May 2016, while the interview with the male teacher, Mr Zain was done in August 2016. In general, Ms Hanizah found Aarif to be a good student, as during his lessons he often participated in class and behaved well. Mr Zain, perceived that Aarif was able to understand the teacher well during the learning process and possess excellent speaking and reading skills, although there were times when he refused to write, and he just sat in his place and looked around.

Language Skills

Ms Hanizah mentioned that Aarif is bilingual with a higher preference for English. During the English class, Aarif only used English to communicate with the teacher and his friends. Even when his friends responded in Malay, he would still communicate with them in English. However, after the lesson was over, Ms Hanizah heard him talking to his friends in Malay. He also had a good friend, who was also good in English as well and they often communicated in English. Ms Hanizah perceived Aarif's English language as very good. She revealed that Aarif was able to identify mistakes found in simple sentences, and at times also corrected the teacher's pronunciation, which showed that Aarif was very confident of his English language. Ms Hanizah was also impressed by Aarif's ability to provide a simple response, yet sounded very nice and very well structured. For example; his response to "*How are you today?*" will be "*I'm fine; thank you*" and not simply "*I'm okay*".

Ms Hanizah also commented on Aarif's English as being unusual. She compared Aarif's English to his Malay language, which sounded quite awkward as it sounded formal, like the language you read in books. After one year of teaching Aarif, Ms Hanizah was very much confident to affirm Aarif as being dominant in his English language. She described his vocabulary as very good; for example, during a vocabulary exercise using the textbook of the topic "pollution", the teacher wrote the word on the board and asked if anyone knew the meaning of the word, in which he explained more to the class, and to his friends around him. Usually, he would add more vocabulary to a certain topic and understood the meaning too. Ms Hanizah also stated that Aarif really enjoyed Language Arts when they needed to produce something, or even tell a story or recite a poem.

Mr Zain was also of the opinion that Aarif is bilingual but preferred to speak in English more than Malay. He also communicated mostly in English to the teacher and his friends during English class. Nevertheless, the teacher also heard him speaking in both languages with his friends during class time. The teacher explained that Aarif would speak in Malay with his friends who could not understand English well. According to Mr Zain, outside the classroom, he noted that Aarif would still speak to him mostly in English and spoke to his friends in Malay. He also rated Aarif's fluency in English as excellent, and that his pronunciation with the American accent was exceptional. It was fascinating to know that he usually corrected his friends' pronunciation, and even corrected the teacher's. From his class experience and observation, Mr Zain was convinced that Aarif was more dominant in his English language. He considered Aarif's English as very proficient in vocabulary and pronunciation. Mr Zain found him to have a large size of words as well as difficult words. In terms of literal interpretation, Ms Hanizah noticed that Aarif did not like jokes. She stated that when they make jokes, they rarely got a response from him. Mr Zain however mentioned that Aarif could understand jokes, sarcasms, and idioms, especially when an explanation was given.

As for tenses, Ms Hanizah described Aarif as having a contrasting ability in speaking and writing, as he was able to speak automatically using correct tenses; however, he made a lot of mistakes in writing, including tenses, spelling and punctuation. In terms of speaking, sometimes he even corrected the teacher's tenses as well. The other teacher, Mr Zain was also of the opinion that Aarif understood the rules and was able to use the tenses correctly. Mr Zain recounted that whenever he brought pictures to the class and asked the students to produce sentences, Aarif was always the first to raise his hand to answer spontaneously. Whenever the students were given worksheets in class, Aarif would spontaneously proofread the worksheets given and inform Mr Zain of any typing errors he spotted.

Examination

With regard to the examination in his Year 4, Ms Hanizah stated that it was a pity that although he spoke English very fluently, the results of his examination never reflected his true ability. During Ms Hanizah's one-year experience teaching him, he never scored an A for his English paper during the exams, in which he usually scored a B.

She related that it could be due to his short attention span since the students were required to produce their answers in the time allotted, which took quite some time. Unlike Ms Hanizah, Mr Zain was of the opinion that his performance for his English paper was satisfactory. However, there were some sections in which he should be trained to focus more, to do it slowly, yet in step by step and also to re-check. Mr Zain believed that by doing so, he would be able to improve all his weaknesses and score an A, as he can understand the questions, the descriptions, he knows the answers and the reasoning. In the final examination of his Year 5 in October 2016, after the interview session with Mr Zain, Aarif recorded the highest in his class and scored A in both his English papers; he scored 84 for Paper 1 and 92 for Paper 2.

Passion and Talents

Because of his fluent speech and his ability to speak on a topic that he likes spontaneously, Ms Hanizah saw his talent in speaking that could be polished for an oratory English competition. According to Ms Hanizah, when Aarif was in Year 4, he was so passionate with *Angry Birds*, which he always talked about, and even told the teacher about how he won the *Angry Birds* games he played on the online games. He also loved to play with small things, like cards, or papers, which were cut into small pieces, and sometimes played with wool. The papers he cut seemed to have characters, and they always made his table very messy. Mr Zain also mentioned almost similar things in which he would draw something and made his table very messy early in the year (2016), but which had fortunately stopped.

According to Ms Hanizah and Mr Zain, Aarif loved drawing things which involved creative thinking. He noticed Aarif's interest in science fiction and science exploration which required high imagination. Mr Zain explained about an activity that had taken place the previous week before the interview was conducted, in which he taught them about space exploration. He made the students contribute their ideas to design and create a spaceship in which Aarif designed his spaceship which looked extraordinary, and finished in a short time. Mr Zain also explained how Aarif was the first to provide an explanation and to imagine the type of ship he wanted to build. Aarif really enjoyed it and was able to explain it well with minor grammatical errors. Mr Zain also narrated an occurrence when the students were given a set of exercises and were told to open the textbook, "*This exercise, page on the textbook, page 111*". Nonetheless, Aarif responded by asking whether he could complete the exercises without looking at the book. Aarif completed the exercises earlier, with all correct answers compared to his peers.

Sensory Issues and Emotion

Ms Hanizah was aware of Aarif's sensitivity to noise as that could disturb him and affect his emotions. Mr Zain mentioned how Aarif could be emotionally disturbed when someone spoke rudely to him, when he would impulsively respond and reply something in return.

Social Skills

As for social skills, Ms Hanizah mentioned that Aarif had close friends with him. There were times when working in a group could cause problems as there were friends who did not welcome him. However, he enjoyed doing presentations representing his groups, and his friends

would always welcome him to take the role as a presenter, because they know he can speak English well. Mr Zain noticed that Aarif sometimes would isolate himself. Occasionally, he also walked around and mixed with his friends. Most of the time, he would be sitting at his place rather than going around and disturbing others while doing his own task. He commented that Aarif had a good relationship with the teacher and his friends.

Classroom and Behaviour

According to Ms Hanizah, there were times when Aarif did not want to finish his work, and there were times when he would try to continue after being persuaded. Mr Zain mentioned that earlier on in 2016, Aarif would cry when he was disturbed and reacted by shouting in class. However, things seemed to improve for him, as he seemed to be calmer, and would sit quietly at his place. Mr Zain explained how his stationeries and books on the tables were jumbled up and not arranged properly before, and that the situation had improved. As for completing his work, Mr Zain found that Aarif could complete his work in class when he was more focused.

Pedagogical Implications

Aarif exhibited a confluence of traits associated with ASD, including heightened levels of anxiety, auditory sensitivity, and inattention. Several variables were identified as contributing to his academic difficulties and his failure to meet deadlines for completing assignments. Despite being enrolled in a conventional educational setting, exhibiting above-average cognitive abilities, possessing English as his first language, and demonstrating proficiency in academic pursuits, he nevertheless necessitates additional educational assistance. According to Saroya Yahya et al (2013a), failure to provide educational support to these youngsters may result in academic disparities between them and their typically developing peers as they progress in age.

Enhancing knowledge about ASD and implementing efficacious instructional approaches would contribute to improved academic performance of Aarif, as well as other children with ASD, within the inclusive educational setting. The implementation of highly structured teaching strategies, such as directed learning, scaffolding, task repetition, and chunked material delivery, would provide support to individuals, as these techniques emphasise clarity and organisation. Similarly, visual cues also adhere to the aforementioned principle. Both pedagogical approaches characterised by a high degree of structure and the incorporation of visual aids contribute to enhanced comprehension during knowledge dissemination, ultimately leading to a reduction in individuals' anxiety levels. Having clear expectations of class sessions is a crucial part of learning for children with ASD (Iovannone et al., 2003; Yahya, Md Yunus et al., 2013a). The reduction of high anxiety levels can be achieved by the implementation of anticipated and routine schedules, hence improving individuals' capacity to concentrate and maintain attention throughout classroom activities (Medina & Salamon, 2012; Patten & Watson, 2011).

Conclusions

Aarif provides a unique case in which a child with high-functioning ASD speaks English fluently with native speaker-like accents and possess above average intelligence even though they are born and raised up in Malaysia. However, he struggles in schools due to his social skills, behavioural and sensory problems as well as his literal interpretation to context. The language profile of a child with high-functioning ASD will be fascinating as it will provide more insights into understanding the strengths and weaknesses of his language abilities. This

will hopefully create more awareness of autism to the society of Malaysia and assist teachers to teach the children better in school.

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