



An Autistic Student's Journey in English Learning Strategies within ESP Contexts

Muhammad Nurul Muhlis¹, Putu Dian Danayanti Degeng²

^{1,2}, Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Brawijaya

Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026 - 06- 01 Revised: 2026 06-18 Accepted: 2026 06-23	<i>Inclusive education in Indonesian vocational schools needs to pay more attention to the experiences of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), especially in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) lessons because require complex social communication. Unfortunately, the voices of autistic students are rarely explored because most research focuses on teachers' perspectives. This narrative inquiry study aims to determine how an autistic student experiences and understands English learning strategies in the context of ESP. This study adopts a neurodiversity framework, experiential theory, and inclusive pedagogy with data collection instruments using semi-structured interviews, systematic observations, and field reflections. Then analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. As a result, this study identified four related themes. First, structured routines that serve as the foundation for student's emotional security and cognitive readiness. Second, the pace of instruction and clarity of instructions, which significantly influence his understanding and well-being. Third, modeling and visual-digital support, which serve as the primary pathways to authentic understanding. Fourth, vocational relevance serves as a source of sustained motivation and identity formation. This study also identified a pattern of masking—tendency to pretend to understand in order to maintain social conformity—which acts as an invisible barrier to authentic learning. Thus, this study contributes to the growing literature that places the autistic voice at the center of research in English as a Foreign Language Teaching and English for Specific Purposes. This study also offers evidence-based recommendations for designing inclusive ESP in vocational education in Indonesia.</i>
Keywords: Autistic learner; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); narrative inquiry; inclusive pedagogy; neurodiversity	
DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10616	
Corresponding Author: Muhammad Nurul Muhlis nurulmuhlis123@student .ub.ac.id Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Brawijaya	

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become an urgent issue in English language teaching (ELT), particularly in vocational contexts that prioritise communication. One population requiring special attention among all learners is students with

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2022), ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by variations in social communication and interaction, patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities. These characteristics affect how autistic students participate in learning activities and strategies, process information, and respond to classroom environments. In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learning, the situation can become more demanding because students are expected to develop communication skills connected to vocational contexts. ESP commonly involves activities such as simulations, role-plays, and workplace-based scenarios, as explained by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). Such activities often require spontaneous communication, social interaction, and quick adaptation to changing situations, which may create additional challenges for autistic learners (O'Keeffe and McNally 2023).

Although inclusive education has become more widely implemented in Indonesian vocational schools, research discussing the direct experiences of autistic students in ESP classrooms is still limited. Existing studies on English instruction for students with special needs have mostly examined teaching strategies, curriculum adaptation, or intervention outcomes from the teachers' point of view, including studies conducted by Fletcher-Watson et al. (2021). This has resulted in a significant epistemic gap whereby what autistic students actually experience and feel during learning remains underexplored. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, authentic understanding of educational experience can only emerge through the narratives of those who live it.

Several previous studies have begun to examine language learning for autistic students, yet none has fully placed the autistic student's perspective at the centre of inquiry. For instance, Padmadewi et al. (2023) found that autistic students in Indonesian inclusive classrooms responded differently to visual strategies, although the subjective dimensions of those responses were not explored. Similarly, Ioannou et al., (2020) documented autistic students' discomfort during English role-play activities, yet firsthand student accounts were not foregrounded as primary data.

Kristiyantini and Umam (2022) used a narrative inquiry to document the process of assessing autistic students' reading comprehension through task-based activities. Their study demonstrated the importance of a narrative approach to understanding English language learning among autistic students. However, this study focused on teachers, thus underexploring the learning experiences of autistic students. In the context of ESP in Indonesia in particular, there has been no study that focuses on the narrative experience of an autistic learner. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap.

This study is based on three main theories. First, the neurodiversity approach (Lerner et al., 2023; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022) is a theoretical framework that provides guidance for understanding autism as a valid form of

neurological diversity rather than a disability that needs to be corrected. At the same time, autistic learners may demonstrate distinctive strengths such as strong visual processing, attention to detail, preference for structured systems, and deep engagement with areas of personal interest. Therefore, good educational design must be based on how autistic students understand and experience learning.

Second, experiential theory as proposed by Dewey (1938), whose relevance to contemporary inclusive education continues to be affirmed (Tagarda & Mahinay, 2025; Linh, 2024), serves as a philosophical foundation for understanding educational experiences as those that facilitate growth, and miseducative experiences as those that hinder growth and instil negative attitudes towards learning. Third, the inclusive pedagogy framework (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), which remains widely applied in contemporary inclusive education research (Luo & Li, 2024), is a theoretical foundation that provides insight into how teachers can rethink their understanding of learner diversity. In practice, structured instructional approaches such as the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) framework have been widely implemented to support autistic students. This approach provides a visual and sequential structure that makes the thinking load lighter and the surrounding environment easier to understand (Mesibov & Shea, 2010). This approach also aligns with neurodiversity and inclusive pedagogy, as it values and accepts the learning styles of autistic children rather than trying to mold them into what is considered "normal."

These frameworks are then bound together through an approach known as narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) — a research method that treats stories or narratives not merely as a means of collecting data, but also as the form of the findings themselves. Recent scholarship continues to affirm narrative inquiry as a rigorous methodology for capturing lived educational experience (Wei, 2023; Breckenridge & Keenan, 2023). This approach was chosen because narrative inquiry naturally positions autistic individuals as those who know best about their own experiences. This aligns with the spirit of neurodiversity, with the principle "nothing about us without us," meaning that no decisions about us can be made without our involvement (Catala, 2024). In the context of ELT, this approach has been shown to complement aspects often overlooked by research using other approaches. These include how students feel while learning, moments when something suddenly becomes clear and extraordinary, and the personal meaning attached to each learning activity (Barkhuizen et al., 2024). These are aspects of human nature that cannot be seen or measured through numbers and statistics.

The present study seeks to deeply understand how autistic individuals experience and interpret the experience of learning English in an ESP context, from their own stories and perspectives, using a narrative inquiry approach. In the current investigation, the researcher holds a dual position as both an ESP tutor and a researcher. This position offers the advantage of familiarity with the classroom

context and a close relationship with the participants. However, on the other hand, this position also requires extra caution to ensure that this closeness does not influence and change the way researchers interpret the data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, (2009). From here, the main question that is the aim of the research arises. Namely, how does an autistic student experience and interpret English learning strategies in the context of an ESP classroom?

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative method with a narrative inquiry design, as introduced by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The focus of this study was experience, and narrative served as both a research method and a means of presenting results. Three key aspects comprise narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality addresses how past, present, and future experiences are interconnected. Sociality encompasses individual feelings and dynamics. Place encompasses the physical and social contexts that shape experiences, as explained by Xu and Connelly (2022).

These three aspects served as a reference for data collection and analysis. The narrative inquiry approach was chosen because this study focuses on understanding how an autistic student experiences ESP (English for Specific Purposes) learning in daily educational settings. The study does not emphasize numerical results or general conclusions, but rather focuses on personal experiences and how these experiences are shaped by the participants' learning environments.

The participant was an autistic male student enrolled in a vocational school in Indonesia. He had received a formal diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and regularly attended private English tutoring sessions with the researcher. The tutoring materials focused on ESP communication skills related to his vocational major. The participant was selected purposively for several reasons. He had a formal ASD diagnosis, was actively studying in a vocational education setting, and regularly participated in tutoring sessions throughout the study. Only one participant was involved because narrative inquiry prioritizes depth and detailed understanding of individual experience rather than generalization across many participants.

Data were gathered from interviews, observations, and field notes. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participant's experiences during English learning activities. The interview questions were developed using concepts from narrative inquiry, Dewey's theory of experience, autism pedagogy, and ESP learning principles. The interviews focused on emotional experiences during learning, responses toward routines, opinions about visual and digital media, experiences with demonstrations, and participation in ESP activities connected to workplace situations. All interview sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Classroom observations were also conducted during

tutoring sessions. An observation checklist was used to examine emotional engagement, responses toward teaching strategies, processing time, and reactions toward visual supports used during learning activities. In addition, field notes were written after each tutoring session. These notes included teaching activities, participant responses, and reflections from the researcher during the learning process. Using several data sources helped provide a more detailed understanding of the participant's experiences.

Table 1. Research Instrument Grid

No	Instrument	Measured Aspects	Technique
1	Semi-structured interview	Emotional response to English language learning; experience with structured routines; response to visual/digital media; perception of modeling; engagement in ESP tasks Emotional engagement; behavioral response to strategies; processing time; use of visual supports; engagement in ESP tasks	In-depth interview
2	Observation checklist	Emotional involvement; behavioral response to strategy; processing time; use of visual support; involvement in ESP tasks	Direct observation
3	Reflective field notes	Instructional strategies used; participant responses; researcher interpretations; reflective positionality	Researcher's notes

The observation checklist consisted of 20 indicators grouped into four dimensions. The first dimension, Indicator 1-7 focused on structure and routine. The second dimension examined the pace and clarity of instruction (Indicators 8-10). Indicators 11-16 focused on modeling as well as visual and digital support, while Indicators 17-20 explored vocational relevance in the learning process. Each indicator was evaluated using three categories: Yes, Partially, or No, based on observations made during the tutoring sessions.

Table 2. Observation Checklist

No	Indicator	Theme
1	Student appears emotionally prepared and ready at the start of the session	Theme 1
2	Student displays positive emotions (calmness, comfort, visible interest) consistently	Theme 1
3	Signs of discomfort (withdrawal, silence) appear when instructions are unclear	Theme 1

4	Excessive variation in activity types triggers expressions of fatigue or hesitation	Theme 1
5	Student appears confident and calm when the sequence of activities is stable	Theme 1
6	Activities proceed more smoothly when steps are clearly explained	Theme 1
7	Student falls silent when instructions change suddenly	Theme 1
8	Student struggles to understand brief instructions without detailed elaboration	Theme 2
9	Student's focus decreases when explanations are excessively long	Theme 2
10	Processing time varies depending on the difficulty level of the material	Theme 2
11	Student begins working on tasks only after witnessing a live demonstration	Theme 3
12	Student's understanding increases significantly following a demonstration	Theme 3
13	Without modeling, student responds with superficial statements of understanding	Theme 3
14	Cognitive engagement is faster when visual materials are used	Theme 3
15	Combination of video, images, text, and audio enables smoother comprehension	Theme 3
16	Without visual support, student experiences increased distraction, fatigue, and disengagement	Theme 3
17	Student shows visible enthusiasm when content connects to their vocational field	Theme 4
18	Student is able to infer contextual meaning through existing vocational familiarity	Theme 4
19	Concentration challenges arise when task pace is excessive and content is abstract	Theme 4
20	Student occasionally requires additional support to complete tasks independently	Theme 4

The data were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis following the

approaches proposed by Riessman (2008). The analysis began with transcribing and reviewing all interview recordings, observation results, and field notes in detail. After that, the researcher identified important narrative moments related to emotional responses, engagement, confusion, and resistance during learning activities. The next step was coding the data based on several main themes within the conceptual framework, including structure and routines, visual and digital support, modeling and explicit instruction, emotional engagement, and vocational relevance.

The coded findings were then reorganized into connected learning narratives using the three-dimensional framework of narrative inquiry. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher used data triangulation, participant verification, detailed contextual descriptions, and reflective journals throughout the research process Creswell and Poth (2018). Because the researcher also acted as the participant's tutor, to minimize the potential influence of bias arising from closeness to the participants, the researcher kept a reflective journal throughout the study and continually reevaluated field interpretations during the analysis process.

The researcher also tried to separate pedagogical assumptions from narrative meanings. To do this, the researcher prioritized the explanations provided by the participant himself during the interpretation process. Written consent was obtained from both the participant and the legal guardian before the study was conducted. The participant's identity was kept confidential through the use of a pseudonym, and participation in the study was voluntary.

3. Result

Throughout this study, the participant is referred to as Raka (pseudonym), an autistic student enrolled in a hospitality program at a vocational high school in Indonesia. The narrative analysis resulted in four main themes, which are presented based on the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place in narrative inquiry.

Theme 1: Structured Routines as the Foundation of Emotional Security and Cognitive Readiness

At the beginning of most tutoring sessions, Raka appeared calm and willing to participate in classroom activities. During the interview, he stated that when lessons followed a predictable routine, he felt "happy and excited" and "comfortable, free, and not stressed." Similarly, observations showed that Raka usually came to class prepared and calm (Indicator 1: Yes). He also displayed emotional states such as comfort and interest during learning activities (Indicator 2: Yes).

When asked about how classroom routines impacted him, Raka explained that consistent learning sequences helped him prepare for the next stage of the lesson. He also mentioned that he needed step-by-step explanations to adapt to

new routines. This helped him process information gradually. Observations showed that Raka appeared more confident when class activities followed a consistent sequence (Indicator 5: Yes; Indicator 6: Yes). On the other hand, Indicator 7 showed that sudden changes in the sequence of activities made him appear confused and withdrawn when faced with unclear instructions or changes in structure. Furthermore, observations of Indicator 4 indicated that routines provided Raka with a sense of security. However, sessions with excessive activity variation made Raka appear tired or hesitant. This suggests that the quality of structure plays a significant role for this student.

Table 3. Results of Interviews, Observations, and Research Field Notes

Interview data	Observation findings	Research field notes
“That made things easier for me because I could get used to the routine, so I could anticipate and prepare for the next activities.” (Q2)	Student appeared to be in a state of readiness when the learning session began Ind. 1 (Yes). Positive emotional expressions were also evident in student during the learning process Ind. 2 (Yes). Self-confidence and calm were stronger when the sequence of learning activities was consistent and predictable Ind. 5 (Yes). Learning also flowed more smoothly when the steps of the activities were clearly explained from the beginning Ind. 6 (Yes). Sudden changes in instructions caused student to become quiet and appear inactive in class Ind. 7 (Yes). Too many types of activities in one session gave rise to signs of fatigue, laziness, or boredom in student Ind. 4 (Yes).	Sessions that followed a clear and consistent sequence, such as an introduction, then vocabulary, exercises, and a conclusion, kept participants more engaged in the learning process. In contrast, experimental sessions with a variable format showed no decrease in student engagement. When there was a sudden change, participants often became silent and expressed confusion through their body language.
“When the teacher explains the steps, I feel like I understand better... it helps my brain process things slowly and in detail.” (Q2)	Ind. 3 (Yes): Signs of discomfort appeared (withdrawal, silence) when instructions were unclear, not at the start of a normal session.	The researcher noted that consistently structured, step-by-step explanations yielded richer verbal responses compared to dense, single-instruction prompts.

Theme 2: Teaching Pace and Clarity as Determinants of Understanding and Well-being

Raka's story provides a profound, physiologically grounded insight into how the pace of instruction affects his cognitive processes. During the interview, Raka explained that delivering information too quickly caused what he described as a "dizzy and overloaded" feeling in his brain, resulting in an inability to follow or understand the lesson content. Raka explained that it was difficult to follow lessons delivered too quickly because he felt he needed more time to process the information. However, Raka also explained that lessons that were too slow sometimes made him lose focus or feel sleepy. This suggests that the pace of the class affected Raka's participation and attention during learning activities.

Another important finding was how Raka responded to instructions that were unclear to him. He admitted that he sometimes answered "yes" even when he didn't fully understand the explanation or instructions given. In some situations, he preferred not to ask questions during class activities even though he felt confused. This made it difficult for teachers to understand what he needed and left him confused. Observational data showed a similar pattern. Indicator 8 (Partial) indicates that Raka is generally able to follow short instructions, but sometimes has difficulty understanding unclear or insufficiently detailed instructions. Similarly, Indicators 9 and 10 also received partial scores because it appears that lengthy explanations often distract him, while the time required to understand information varies depending on the difficulty of the material.

Table 4. Results of Interviews, Observations, and Research Field Notes

Interview data	Observation findings	Research field notes
"When the teacher explains too quickly, my brain gets dizzy... I feel like my brain is burning up and I can't keep up"; "When it's too slow... I get bored and sleepy more easily." (Q3)	If the explanation is too long, concentration will drop. This makes it easy for students to understand but also makes them bored easily. Ind. 9 (Partially). It appears that processing time varies depending on the difficulty level of the material. Ind. 10 (Partially).	Researcher observed an optimal window of delivery of approximately 3–5 minutes per instructional segment before needing a pause or switching modalities to maintain attention.
"When the teacher's instructions are confusing, I tend to just say yes, even though I don't actually understand" (Q3)	Eng. 8 (Partial): The student has difficulty understanding brief instructions without detailed elaboration, verbal responses appear affirmative even though understanding is not yet	Masking behavior was observed in post-session interviews, not through direct observation, suggesting that verbal comprehension checks alone

	established.	are inadequate as an assessment.
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Theme 3: Modeling and Visual-Digital Support as Key Pathways to Engagement and Understanding

Theme 3 showed that demonstrations and visual materials helped Raka during learning activities. He described the examples provided by his mentor before the task as "very helpful" for understanding how things work, as this allowed him to observe and emulate the practices directly. This is also supported by observational data from Indicator 11 (Yes), which noted that Raka consistently began working on the task only after watching the mentor's demonstration, and appeared much more enthusiastic and prepared after seeing practical examples.

Similarly, Indicator 12 (Yes) confirmed that understanding improved significantly after the demonstration. Most importantly, Indicator 13 (Yes) documented a recurring pattern in which, in the absence of mentor modeling, Raka offered dubious statements of understanding to mask his lack of actual understanding, reinforcing the pretense identified in Theme 2 and constituting what could be interpreted as a miseducational experience in experiential learning (Tagarda & Mahinay, 2025), an episode that hindered growth and reinforced a false sense of self-confidence.

Raka also described positive experiences when visual and digital media were used during learning activities. According to him, visual materials helped him stay focused and made the lessons feel less boring. He also mentioned that digital media felt more familiar to him in everyday life. Observation results supported these responses. Indicator 14 (Yes) showed quicker responses when visual materials were used during lessons. Indicator 15 (Yes) also showed that videos, images, written text, and audio helped him understand the lesson more easily. In contrast, sessions without visual support often resulted in lower concentration and reduced participation during classroom activities (Indicator 16: Yes).

Table 5. Results of Interviews, Observations, and Research Field Notes

Interview data	Observation findings	Research field notes
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"It really helped me... it really helped me see and model the practice directly so I could imitate it later." (Q4)	The student started working on the task more quickly after demonstration. Ind. 11 (Yes). Example make the student understand better. Ind. 12 (Yes). Without demonstrations, the student sometimes said, "I understand," even though he doesn't really understand. Ind. 13 (Yes).	During sessions without demonstrations at the beginning of the lesson, the same mistakes often appeared repeatedly in students' work.
"When learning uses videos and digital media, I feel more focused and enjoy it... because it's not just text, but also visualizations." (Q5)	Student react more quickly when visual materials were used. Ind. 14 (Yes). Teacher use videos, pictures, written text, and audio to help the student understand better. Ind. 15 (Yes). The student often seemed tired, bored, and focus less in sessions without visual support. Ind. 16 (Yes).	The researcher noted that Multimodal sessions appeared to increase participation and verbal responsiveness compared to text-based instruction.

Theme 4: The Relevance of Vocational Education as a Source of Sustained Motivation and Identity Building

Raka explained that ESP materials connected to hospitality work made him more interested in learning activities. He said that lessons related to workplace situations felt more useful because they were in line with his future goals and could help him understand a context in English, because he was already familiar with the terms. He gave an example, when the material was related to hospitality, such as role-playing as a receptionist, which was in line with his field, he could understand the learning more easily because he could imagine how English would be used in the workplace later. Because of this connection, the lessons seemed to have more personal meaning for him.

Similar patterns were also found during classroom observations. Indicator 17 (Yes) shows that Raka displayed clear enthusiasm when the learning material was related to his desired field of work. Furthermore, Indicator 18 (Yes) shows that although his vocabulary mastery was still limited, he was still able to understand meaning through contexts related to the hospitality workplace. However, Indicator 19 (Partial) shows that concentration difficulties began to emerge when assignments were given too quickly or when material was presented abstractly without connection to familiar contexts. Meanwhile, Indicator 20 (Partial) shows that although Raka can generally engage productively in learning activities, in certain situations he still needs additional support to complete tasks independently.

Table 6. Results of Interviews, Observations, and Research Field Notes

Interview data	Observation findings	Research field notes
“I like it when the course material relates to real-world workplace situations, especially in the vocational field I’ve chosen, which is hospitality. Because I think that’s more relevant to my goals.” (Q6)	Student appeared enthusiastic when the material discussed related to the professional world within their field of study. Ind. 17 (Yes). Ind. 18 (Yes): It appears that student was able to infer the context because he was already familiar with the professional world and everyday life.	Researcher noted that hospitality-based scenarios (greeting guests, taking orders) consistently elicited longer and more accurate verbal responses than abstract or general topics.
“In my opinion, your teaching style is very helpful. There isn’t anything that’s particularly difficult. I feel that as long as you’re here, all the difficult things will gradually become easier.” (Q6)	When the activity proceeded too quickly and was too abstract, difficulties in concentrating and communicating arose Ind. 19 (Partially) Ind. 20 (Partially); some additional support was needed to complete the task independently.	Students’ positive feedback on the overall learning experience indicates that a sense of security in peer relationships and the relevance of the material play a role in fostering a positive attitude toward learning; both of these aspects need to be maintained in the design of inclusive ESP programs.

Overall, these four themes describe interconnected experiences. Raka's involvement in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) felt more meaningful when his learning process was supported by a well-organized routine, an appropriate pace, the use of multiple demonstration methods, and materials directly related to his work. The interplay between these factors suggests that Raka's learning experience was not influenced by a single aspect, but by a combination of many mutually reinforcing learning elements. The consistent results of interviews, observations, and field notes across all themes further strengthen the findings of this study and serve as an important foundation for further discussion.

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationships among these four themes in shaping the participants' ESP learning experiences with emotional safety emerges as a key cross-thematic condition that influences participation, openness, and “masking” behavior during classroom interactions.

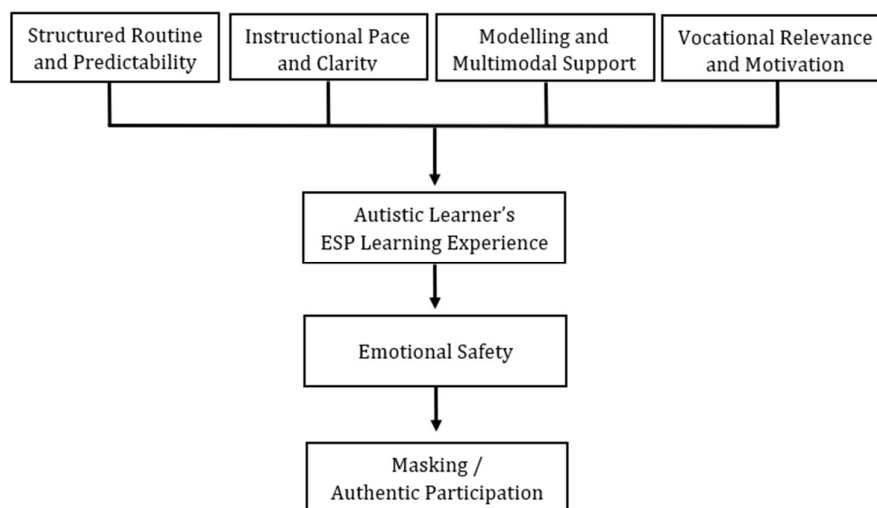


Figure 1. Interconnected Relationships Among Themes in the Participant's ESP Learning Experience

4. Discussion

The results of this study show several important aspects of how autistic students experience ESP learning in vocational education settings. In Raka's case, it is clear that many factors influence learning, not only classroom instruction but also routines, interaction patterns, learning media, and the relevance of the material to his future career goals. To understand this experience, this discussion draws on Dewey's experiential theory along with perspectives from neurodiversity and inclusive pedagogy.

The findings in Theme 1 indicate that structured routines play a crucial role during learning activities. Raka described predictable classroom patterns as helping him feel calmer and more prepared before participating in learning. This is similar to what has been discussed in studies on structured learning for autistic students, including research by Mesibov and Shea (2010) on the TEACCH approach, which emphasizes the importance of consistent routines and clear learning structures in reducing student confusion and anxiety during lessons. In this study, routines also appeared to help Raka participate more confidently in learning activities. This finding is similar to Padmadewi et al. (2023), who found that autistic students may respond differently to learning strategies depending on how learning activities are organized.

Theme 2 exemplified how the pace of learning in the classroom should be managed. Raka explained that because he needed more time to process information, it was difficult to follow lessons that moved too quickly. At the same time, lessons that moved too slowly sometimes caused boredom and reduced attention. This suggests that the pace of instruction may strongly influence autistic students' engagement during learning activities. Previous studies by Poulsen et al.

(2024) and Schafer et al. (2024) also discuss differences in information processing among autistic individuals. In addition, Deci and Ryan (2000) explain that learning motivation may decrease when activities are either too difficult or not sufficiently engaging. Another important finding involved Raka's tendency to say that he understood the lesson even when he was still confused. In several situations, he preferred not to ask additional questions during class activities. Similar patterns were reported by Cook et al. (2021), who found that autistic students may hide confusion in order to avoid uncomfortable social situations in class. Because of this, classroom learning may appear successful on the surface while students still experience difficulties understanding the material. In experiential learning theory, this situation has been described as a miseducative experience Tagarda and Mahinay (2025); Linh (2024).

Theme 3 highlighted the importance of modeling and visual-digital support during learning activities. Both interview and observation data showed that demonstrations and multimodal materials helped Raka understand lessons more easily. These findings are consistent with Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of observation in the learning process. Arishaba (2024) also points out that this theory remains relevant in modern education today. However, Raka's experience demonstrates that modeling is not simply a supplementary technique for demonstrating how to perform a task. For him, modeling is the primary foundation for concretely understanding a task before being asked to perform it independently.

Previous research by Urrea et al. (2024) has demonstrated the effectiveness of technology-based modeling in developing the academic skills of autistic students, and Raka's experience extends these findings to the realm of communication in ESP. These results are further supported by El Shemy et al. (2024), who found that augmented reality-based language learning increased the engagement and comprehension of autistic students through multimodal demonstrations. From a neurodiversity perspective, a preference for visual and digital media should not be viewed as compensating for deficiencies. Rather, it can be understood as a legitimate, individual-strength-based way of thinking (Lerner et al., 2023; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022).

Theme 4 makes a distinctive contribution specifically to ESP literature. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argued that ESP instruction derives its pedagogical value from its focus on learners' authentic communicative needs. Raka's narrative supports this principle from an autistic perspective. According to him, vocational relevance functioned not only as a motivational factor, but also as a scaffold for contextual understanding. When instructional content was presented through familiar workplace situations, he appeared better able to draw upon prior experiential knowledge to compensate for limitations in formal linguistic competence. This finding is consistent with Ioannou et al., (2020), who observed that contextual familiarity may support autistic students' participation in

language-learning activities.

However, the present study also introduces an additional dimension that extends previous discussions of ESP relevance. For Raka, vocational content was not merely familiar, but personally connected to his future identity and aspirations. Engagement with ESP learning therefore appeared to function as an investment in his future self rather than simply participation in classroom activity. From an inclusive pedagogy perspective, this finding supports Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) argument that meaningful inclusion should not only differentiate instruction, but also connect learning to learners' identities, lived experiences, and real-world contexts. Vocational relevance should therefore be understood not as an optional enhancement in inclusive ESP instruction, but as a central pedagogical principle that shapes emotional engagement and meaningful participation.

One important cross-theme finding to note is the masking behavior that emerged in Themes 2 and 3. He admitted that he sometimes said he understood the lesson even when he was still unsure about the instructions. Because of this, teachers may not immediately realize when additional explanation is needed. These findings also indicate that Raka's openness is influenced by the closeness of his social relationships within the learning environment.

When expressing his difficulties, he explained that he felt more comfortable speaking honestly with the researcher, who also acted as his tutor. This was a positive aspect because it helped him speak more openly about his learning experiences and difficulties during the interview sessions. However, the masking itself operated as an immediate social reflex during instructional interactions. Dewi et al. (2025) found that inclusive classroom environments in Indonesian schools often fail to provide psychologically safe conditions for expressing confusion.

Similarly, Al Jaffal (2022) reported that students with ASD in mainstream educational settings tend to conceal confusion in order to avoid social disruption. Therefore, proactive instructional design may reduce the need for social conformity by ensuring that comprehension is structurally supported rather than merely assumed through verbal cues. Through the use of multimodal demonstrations and instructional scaffolding, educators may mitigate some of the conditions that trigger masking and help students feel safer expressing confusion openly.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed that autistic students' experiences in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are influenced by four key interrelated factors. First, having a clear and structured routine helps the participant feel secure and mentally prepared for each learning activity. Second, the importance of appropriate pacing and clarity in the instructor's delivery of material. If the instructor delivers material too quickly or too slowly, the participant may struggle to understand and feel uncomfortable during the lesson. Third, the use of visual and digital examples can

help the participant better understand the material. He seemed to understand classroom communication more easily after seeing direct examples first. Fourth, the participant was also more interested in lessons that were related to his vocational major because the material felt closer to the type of work he wanted to do in the future. This allows student to connect what he learns to his future career goals. These four aspects together illustrate how a meaningful ESP experience depends not only on teaching strategies but also on how well the learning environment supports their neurological, emotional, and motivational needs. Furthermore, across these four key dimensions, a recurring pattern emerges that hinders learning development, namely the habit of concealing misunderstandings to maintain social harmony. These findings emphasize that relying solely on verbal questions to assess student understanding is insufficient.

Overall, these findings suggest that vocational education in Indonesia must be better designed, especially for students with special needs. Educational design must go beyond simply differentiating content based on difficulty levels, but also be structurally supportive, employ a variety of teaching methods, and focus on vocational development. Therefore, students no longer need to pretend to understand. To complement this study, future research could expand on this by involving more autistic students, using more in-depth research methods, or creating a curriculum developed with autistic students to ensure they are truly engaged in the learning process. This ultimately aligns with the principle of neurodiversity: "nothing about us without us."

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