

English language teachers' perspectives and support of students with Asperger's
Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism

Perspectivas y apoyo de los maestros de la lengua inglesa sobre estudiantes con
síndrome de Asperger/Autismo de alto funcionamiento

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the perspectives of university English language teachers regarding students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS)/High Functioning Autism (HFA), particularly in relation to these students' ability to learn English and the ways teachers support them in the classroom. Data were collected through semi-structured

interviews with six English teachers from universities in Mexico and the United States and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that teachers' perspectives on students with AS/HFA are closely linked to their levels of knowledge, prior experience, and awareness of the condition, shaping both their perspectives and instructional decisions. Two main themes were identified: Knowledge as both Product and Producer of Perspective and Toward Empowering Teachers' Support in the English Classroom through Informed Awareness. Overall, the results highlight the need for increased understanding and informed awareness of AS/HFA among English language teachers. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of professional development opportunities, such as targeted workshops, and the use of flexible lesson planning to better support students with AS/HFA in English language classrooms.

Keywords: Asperger's Syndrome; High Functioning Autism; College/University Teachers; English Language Teaching; English Teachers' Perceptions; Teacher's support.

Resumen: Este estudio cualitativo explora las perspectivas de docentes universitarios de lengua inglesa respecto a estudiantes con Síndrome de Asperger (SA)/Autismo de Alto Funcionamiento (AAF), en particular en relación con su capacidad para aprender inglés y las formas en que el profesorado los apoya en el aula. Los datos se recopilaban mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas a seis docentes de inglés de universidades en México y Estados Unidos, y se analizaron mediante un enfoque de análisis temático. Los hallazgos muestran que las perspectivas del profesorado sobre los estudiantes con SA/AAF están estrechamente relacionadas con sus niveles de conocimiento, experiencia previa y grado de sensibilización respecto a esta condición, lo cual influye tanto en sus percepciones como en sus decisiones pedagógicas. Se identificaron dos temas principales: *el conocimiento como producto y productor de la perspectiva y hacia el fortalecimiento del apoyo docente en el aula de inglés a través de una concienciación informada*. En conjunto, los resultados destacan la necesidad de fortalecer la comprensión y la sensibilización informada sobre el SA/AAF entre el profesorado de lengua inglesa. El estudio concluye subrayando la importancia de impulsar oportunidades de desarrollo profesional, como talleres especializados, así

como de implementar una planificación didáctica flexible para apoyar de manera más efectiva a estudiantes con SA/AAF en los contextos de enseñanza del inglés.

Palabras clave: Síndrome de Asperger; Autismo de Alto Funcionamiento; Maestros de Colegio/Universidad; Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa; Perspectivas de Maestros de Inglés; Apoyo de Maestros.

Introduction

Although there has been a recent increase in students diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome/High Functioning Autism (AS/HFA) entering higher education (Knott & Taylor, 2013), it is critical that institutional educators in the English Language Teaching (ELT) program familiarize themselves with the nature of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its impact on their students' learning experiences. It has been over five decades since the initial description of Asperger's Syndrome went virtually unnoticed, until the 1980s when Wing (1981) published a comprehensive clinical account of 34 case histories of individuals she diagnosed with AS/HFA, ranging from 5 to 35 years old (Barnhill, Hagiwara, Myles, Simpson, Brick, & Griswold, 2000). There is currently no available information about the university graduation rates of AS/HFA students in Mexico; however, in the United States, the national graduation rate of university students with AS/HFA was around 41%, compared to 59% among the general student population (Santhanam, 2019).

There is limited information about how students with AS/HFA are perceived by their university English Language (EL) teachers and how EL teachers perceive their role in supporting AS/HFA students' language learning. This is important because there is a gap in knowledge about how to teach English to students with AS/HFA in the complex environment of universities. The purpose of this study was to explore EL teachers' perspectives on students with AS/HFA regarding their ability to learn the language and their own roles in supporting those students in the English language classroom. Toward this end, this research study explored two research questions: 1. What perspective do English Language (EL) teachers have about students with AS/HFA regarding their ability to learn other languages such as English? 2. How do English Language (EL) teachers perceive their role in supporting students with AS/HFA in the English language classroom?

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been an increase in students diagnosed with AS/HFA who are accessing higher education (Knott & Taylor, 2013); however, little information is known about EL teachers' perception of university students with AS/HFA. Despite having been under research since 1944 by Hans Asperger, it was not until 1994 that the study of AS/HFA was finally included in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) (Barahona-Corrêa & Filipe, 2016). More recently, the term "Asperger's Syndrome" (AS) was changed with the publication of the DSM-5 (2013) to High-Functioning Autism (HFA) (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024). The reason for this change was that, according to the DSM-5, all individuals with autism are now diagnosed within the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); yet, the AS term is still widely used by the general community as an informal name for this type of ASD. For the purposes of this article, this demographic will be referred to with both terms, Asperger's Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism (AS/HFA).

Because more AS/HFA students are accessing higher education, it is essential to explore how EL teachers perceive AS/HFA students, given that they represent a vulnerable population whose educational needs may be overlooked in language learning contexts.

Asperger's Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism Characteristics

Asperger's Syndrome is a developmental disorder, named by Hans Asperger, who first described it in 1944. Its key characteristics are typically found in language and cognitive development. In accordance with Barahona-Corrêa and Filipe (2016), those diagnosed with AS/HFA presented difficulties when engaging in social interactions, demonstrated restricted and repetitive behavioral patterns, and had issues in processing and distinguishing sounds, which ultimately impacted their communication skills.

Nevertheless, to make a qualified diagnosis to identify those students with the disorder, Safran (2001) mentioned two primary clusters of traits from DSM-4 (1994): The first primary cluster is a qualitative impairment in social interaction (Safran, 2001). Some of these traits include delays in nonverbal behavior, impairments in establishing relationships with peers, the absence of desire to share personal subjects with others

(e.g., enjoyments, achievements, interests), and delays in social reciprocity. The second major cluster of traits is restrictive in areas and topics of interest. Individuals diagnosed with AS/HFA tend to engage in stereotyped repetitive behaviors and activities, such as sticking to a set of routines, having repetitive motor movements (e.g. nervous tics), and a fixated focus on parts or physical objects of interest (Safran, 2001).

According to Williams (1995), students with AS/HFA tend to be often “off task” due to getting distracted by internal stimuli, being disorganized, and having difficulty focusing on classroom activities. They unconsciously engage in complex inner worlds that go beyond the common daydreaming, which may lead to difficulty learning in group situations. AS/HFA students may frequently engage in relentless “lecturing” in areas of interest, but also demonstrate what could be considered a “stubborn reluctance” in learning subjects outside those areas of interest. These students tended to feel anxious and worried obsessively when faced with unexpected situations or even the slightest changes in the classroom, resulting in stress, fatigue, and emotional overload (Williams, 1995). Because students with AS/HFA demonstrate behaviors which may be considered disruptive to the classroom environment, it is necessary to explore how English teachers understand and approach students diagnosed with AS/HFA.

Teachers’ perspectives about AS/HFA students

There is a growing awareness among teachers about the unique needs of AS/HFA students, but their perspectives often highlight a gap between intent and preparedness. Cumine, Dunlop, and Stevenson (1998) found that despite teachers' lack of knowledge about the AS/HFA, they were the first ones to notice odd, unusual, or different behaviors compared to traditional students. Hay and Winn (2005) mentioned that while AS/HFA students had relatively good verbal skills, teachers often erroneously attributed their lack of social interaction and inappropriate communication behaviors to stubbornness rather than to their condition.

In their study regarding perceptions of AS/HFA students, Hay and Winn (2005) interviewed eighty-nine general education teachers, seven special educators, seventeen parents, and eleven students with AS/HFA from a co-educational secondary school located in a large Australian coastal city. In this study, general

education teachers demonstrated a lack of confidence and understanding on how to manage AS/HFA students, reporting them to be “more demanding of their time, to get frequently distracted, taking longer to settle into a task, having difficulty transcribing notes from the blackboard, producing at times messy work, and finishing their work at slow rates” (Hay & Winn, 2005, p. 145). It was also reported that some general education teachers did not like to take responsibility for AS/HFA students’ behavior management. General education teachers often only recalled instances when students with AS/HFA exhibited problematic behavior, which may have led to limited perceptions of these students’ potential.

On the other hand, special educators viewed working with AS/HFA students as challenging because of their social and communicative behaviors, but still advocated for them by mentioning their strengths (Hay & Winn, 2005). For example, they mentioned that most of the AS/HFA students were cooperative most of the time, and their behavior improved as they went through the grades. Despite the initial behavioral problems that took place when the AS/HFA students arrived at the school, they gradually adapted to their new environment.

While the previous study mentions teachers’ perceptions of AS/HFA students’ behavioral challenges, AS/HFA students possess skills that should be leveraged within learning environments. Krones (2016) found that students with AS/HFA possess academic and cognitive skills similar to or above those of their classmates. However, they were likely to require support and accommodations to be successful, which were often unique to the students. For example, some students may require accommodations such as visual schedules or sensory diets to be successful in the learning environment. With the appropriate tools and strategies, it is possible that AS/HFA students may reach or even surpass regular students’ language learning level.

Relationship between English Language teachers and AS/HFA students

Previous research has shown that a strong rapport between teachers and students can lead to increased student engagement and achievement in language classrooms (Wang & Derakhshan, 2021); therefore, it is critical to explore relationships between EL teachers and AS/HFA students. In Hay and Winn’s (2005) study, AS/HFA students demonstrated interest in developing positive relationships with their teachers;

however, they often faced difficulties developing teacher relationships due to their lack of understanding of social conventions, poor communication skills, and their use of 'confusing' logic to justify their ideas (Barahona-Corrêa and Filipe, 2016).

In the same study, it was hinted that the relationship between general EL teachers and students with AS/HFA was tense due to teachers' lack of confidence and understanding of their AS/HFA students (Hay and Winn, 2005). For example, one of the interviewed teachers asked their student with AS/HFA to turn off their computer but wouldn't do it, so the teacher forcibly turned off the computer, which caused an aggressive reaction from the student. Although AS/HFA students wanted to have a positive relationship with their teachers, some of the students displayed a lack of understanding of social conventions, poor communication skills, and somewhat confusing logic for justifying their actions. One AS/HFA student in this study justified his actions by declaring, "If a teacher shouts out, I shout back. I only like to do school things that interest me. If I do not like the teacher, I do not try very hard in that class" (Safran, 2001, p. 148). While this was not an appropriate way for AS/HFA students to communicate with their teachers, teachers need specialized training on how to properly support AS/HFA students in the English language classroom. General English teachers' relationships with students with AS/HFA were tense, with many teachers expressing discomfort working with such students to the point that they described the students as time-demanding, easily distracted, and slow at performing tasks.

Specialized EL teachers, on the other hand, although having had some challenges teaching AS/HFA students, quickly got accustomed to the way in which AS/HFA students work by being flexible and allowing the students to work with tools that enhanced their learning engagement (Safran, 2001). AS/HFA students even mentioned the helpfulness of the specialized staff as one of "the most valued aspects of their schooling experience" (Safran, 2001, p. 148), which implies that the relationship between the two groups (specialized teachers and students) was positive. This is also supported by Beardon, Martin, and Woolsey's (2009) study, in which they asked students with AS/HFA what they wanted at university and college, and the students emphasized the importance of adequate support/counseling.

Although the AS/HFA students expressed their desire to have instructional support and guidance from special education staff, not all of the interviewed students wished to be identified as needing help, as they did not want to be seen as different

by their peers. There were times in which the special treatment that the AS/HFA students received made them feel uncomfortable. One interviewed student stated, “I do not always like having a teacher aide around me as I can do the schoolwork and the other students see this as cheating” (Hay & Winn, 2005, p. 148). This could be interpreted as the AS/HFA student’s desire to be independent in the classroom and feel included in the learning environment, so as not to be alienated by their peers due to being given perceived “unfair” advantages by the teachers (Humphrey and Symes, 2013).

Another study in the United States explored the barriers General Education (GE) teachers experienced that impact the teaching and inclusion of students with AS/HFA (Jaffal, 2022). Some of these barriers include teachers’ lack of training regarding AS/HFA students, teachers’ lack of collaboration, and lack of resources provided by the school regarding AS/HFA students. Without the proper training and information, teachers may become more reluctant to work with AS/HFA students in the future, and unintentionally form prejudices against those students that could hinder their learning (Hay and Winn, 2005).

Inclusiveness of AS/HFA students in the English Classroom

Inclusion refers to establishing a supportive learning environment so that students of different conditions, backgrounds, and abilities can feel respected, accepted, and have a sense of belonging in the classroom (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). For students with AS/HFA, this would mean that they are not only part of the classroom environment, but also receive instructional support so that they can be successful in that environment.

The North Bali Bilingual School (NBBS) in Indonesia has an inclusion system for students with AS/HFA that is adapted to students' conditions. The AS/HFA student from this study had a lower level of social awareness, which made it difficult for him to be completely included in the classroom. He would pay attention in the classroom, and whenever he did not understand something about the lesson or instruction, the teacher showed him visual media or provided further explanation to facilitate his understanding (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017).

Within this study (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017), special education was described as more of a mechanism of differentiation than a resource directed only to students

with learning difficulties, and it should work inclusively and be considered part of normal educational practice. The NBBS respected the diversity of students, and for that reason, they provided the AS/HFA student with necessary accommodations by school management and teaching staff. One salient finding from this study is the importance of an integrated system of support which included specialized teacher training, so they could understand the AS/HFA student's needs.

EFL University students with AS/HFA in Mexico

Although there is a considerable amount of reliable research and information regarding AS/HFA students and how teachers perceive them from both negative and positive perspectives, unfortunately, there are limited studies in Mexico regarding EFL teachers' perspectives about AS/HFA university students. One qualitative study conducted by Gutiérrez-Aceves et al. (2024) in the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH), Mexico, interviewed an AS/HFA university student who revealed that most of his classmates and teachers were unaware of his condition. Due to this lack of awareness of his AS/HFA diagnosis, the student became a target of bullying, exclusion, and discrimination, which led him to become demotivated to an extent and insecure.

The student explained that he agreed to be interviewed to be better understood, so that others could learn more about his condition. He admitted that sometimes he felt a little strange among both teachers and classmates, which may be because he did not always know how to communicate his feelings in a way that was understandable (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024). In this case, he would have benefited from the support of a specialized teacher, not only academically but emotionally, to express his ideas in a safe space. He had a positive opinion of teachers who had a good attitude and humor, and who did not limit their instruction only to the topics found in the curriculum. Those teachers who were too strict in the classroom caused him discomfort. According to this student, the rigidity of the institution forced teachers to move through the topics in the EFL classroom at a pace that students with autism could not adapt to, hinting that neither the institution nor the teachers were prepared to work with these students (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).

Due to the limited research regarding EL teachers' perceptions of AS/HFA students at the university level, this study aims to explore EL teachers' perspectives

on AS/HFA students, their ability to learn the language, and what they can do to support those students in the English classroom.

Methodology

Worldview, approach, design

This qualitative study adopted Constructivism as the worldview. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), constructivism is based on the principle that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (p.45). Adom Yeboah and Ankrah (2017) describe constructivism as “an approach that asserts that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences” (p. 2). In other words, each individual has a distinctive point of view, based on existing knowledge and values, and researchers rely on these experiences and their interpretations.

Qualitative research undergoes an inductive process that organizes data in categories, and from them, researchers identify patterns, working out under the combination of observation and interviews (Astalin, 2013). The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to attain more detailed information from various EL teachers' points of view. Because English teachers' perceptions are constructed by their knowledge and experiences, this worldview guided the study's design and data analysis.

This study employed a case study design defined as the “analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods” (Astalin, 2013, p. 122). Because the research focuses on university EL teachers, this study used a single-case study with delimited boundaries to the case known as a bounded system (Coombs, 2022). Baxter and Jack (2008) state that, “binding the case will ensure that your study remains reasonable in scope” (pp. 546-547). In other words, placing these boundaries clearly contributes to establishing the scope of the case study. In our case, even though we focus on EL teachers from two contexts, the purpose is to describe the experiences of these teachers when working with students with AS/HFA.

Research context and Participants

This study was carried out in two locations within two universities: a public university in central Mexico in the English Language Teaching (ELT) department and a public university in the southern United States, where students from different countries, such as Germany, Vietnam, China, Japan, and Arabia, amongst others, are taught English. Depending on the setting and the participants' preferences, the semi-structured interviews took place in classrooms, private offices, or learning centers. The participants consisted of three female English teachers from a Mexican university and three English teachers from an American university, one female and two male teachers. Their ages ranged from the mid-twenties to sixty years old. While four of the six teachers (two from each university) had prior experience working with AS/HFA students, none had received formal training on the topic. The criteria set to select these teachers are linked to the boundaries set explained above, as they "indicate the breadth and depth of the study" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 547). However, it is important to note that despite including participants from two countries, the focus of this research remains on the university English teachers as a single case and their perspectives about students with AS/HFA, not on the differences between the teachers from both countries.

Research Instrument and Analysis

For data collection, Author 1 used semi-structured interviews with the EL teachers at the institute to gather more detailed information about their opinions and perspectives on students diagnosed with AS/HFA. Semi-structured interviews allow interviewers considerable freedom to adjust questions throughout the interview and to probe beyond a particular respondent's answers to predetermined questions (Wildemuth, 2016). They also provide the interviewees with freedom to express their points of view. The interviews were held individually in spaces selected by the participants. Author 1 recorded participants' answers, and these interviews, which lasted between fifteen and forty minutes, were transcribed into a digital format for further analysis.

First cycle coding of interview data was organized through the use of descriptive coding, which summarized main concepts discussed by the participants in a word or short phrases (Saldaña, 2016). Researchers engaged in analytic memoing throughout the analysis and discussed them as a team. Researchers then conducted a second cycle of In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) to consider participants' exact words when

describing how they worked with college students with HFA. This information was then categorized into four categories: Teacher's Point of View on AS/HFA, Interactions in class with AS/HFA students, English learning and AS/HFA, College and AS/HFA, and as a result of thematic mapping (Braun & Clarke, 2021), finally grouped into themes.

As a research team, we engaged in ongoing reflexive practices to critically consider our positionalities, particularly during the data analysis phase, in order to ensure a thoughtful and nuanced interpretation of the concepts. All the authors are language learners and trained EL teachers. Author 1, who was a university student at the participating Mexican university majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT), was diagnosed with AS/HFA and provided his own interpretation of the information gathered from the interviews based on both research and his personal experiences and views. Author 2 had experience working as an Inclusion teacher working with AS/HFA students in public education settings. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, Author 3 participated in the data analysis process by reviewing the alignment between the interview data and the emerging themes, providing an additional layer of analytical oversight to minimize bias and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Findings

The first research question in the study explored EL teachers' perspectives of AS/HFA students and their ability to learn other languages such as English. The interviewed EL teachers believed AS/HFA students are capable of achieving a high proficiency level in learning English, with four of them having experience teaching the students. Teacher 1 believed that learning English was for everyone but did not think that the AS/HFA students' characteristics had something to do with it. Teacher 3 asserted that AS/HFA students "can get any level of English they want," and Teacher 2 supported this idea by mentioning that AS/HFA students could get a higher level in the language "by finding out what works for them." This perspective, however, contradicts another statement made by Teacher 4, who believed that AS/HFA students' proficiency in English depended on their "superpower." By "superpower," Teacher 4 referred to the special abilities that students with AS/HFA possessed, such as enhanced focus, understanding of knowledge, and the capability of organizing knowledge into complex ways for a variety of topics, including the English language.

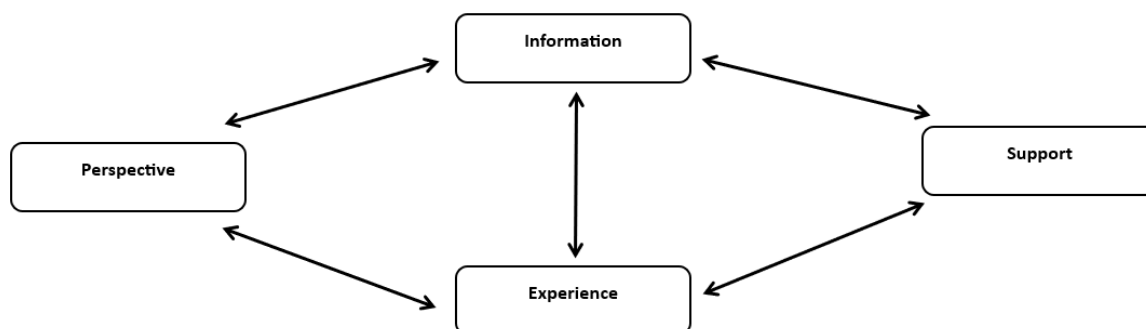
The second research question explored English teachers' perception of their role in supporting students with AS/HFA in the EL classroom. Although EL teachers believe that AS/HFA students can achieve a high level of English language proficiency, they did not know how to support students diagnosed with AS/HFA. In the interviews, the participating EL teachers did not give any specific advice on how to support the AS/HFA students in the English language classroom, despite some participants having previous experience working with these students. Teacher 3 voiced her insecurities by stating, "I just feel frustrated because I don't know how to be useful with these students."

Based on the data collected for this second question, two salient themes emerged: the connection between English teachers' perspectives of AS/HFA students, information about AS/HFA, experience in teaching AS/HFA students, and their level of support for those students. Those themes were Knowledge as both product and producer of Perspective and Toward empowering teachers' support in the English classroom through Informed Awareness. These themes were constructed from the information gathered from the interviewed EL teachers based on their own experiences, points of view, and knowledge.

Based on the data and thematic analysis, a diagram was created that shows the connection between English Teachers' Perspective of AS/HFA, Information about AS/HFA, English Teachers' Experience Teaching AS/HFA Students, and English Teachers' Support to AS/HFA Students in the classroom. Figure 1 describes how these concepts complement and influence each other in the English classroom.

Figure 1

Dynamic Relationship between English Teachers' Perspective, Information, Experience and Support of AS/HFA university students



Note. Source: Author's own.

Knowledge as both Product and Producer of Perspective

As can be seen in Figure 1, there was a dynamic relationship among participating English teachers' perspectives of students with AS/HFA, the information they received about AS/HFA, their teaching experiences with these students, and the instructional support they provided. Perspective is a powerful factor in how information is filtered, as individuals can have different perspectives about certain topics. Information can shape perspectives by nurturing people's minds with knowledge. At the same time, perspective can produce information through the reinterpretation of experiences and previous knowledge to construct a new perspective to be shared and reinterpreted once again.

As this study shows, the opposite can be true. The lack of awareness and knowledge from EL teachers about students diagnosed with AS/HFA can produce ill-informed perspectives. In fact, the lack of awareness proved to be prejudicial in how the former viewed the latter. For example, Teacher 3 was unaware of one of her students' condition as an AS/HFA student until she was informed about it by her colleagues a semester later:

I noticed in the first semester, this student (diagnosed with AS/HFA) had a different behavior, but as my first contact with him was online, I thought this student was just getting distracted and it was lack of attention because he was not responding to my questions as I expected.

Teacher 3 also mentioned a misunderstanding that she had with the same student, as the latter often got distracted and barely paid attention to the former's questions during class. This, once again, was a consequence caused by the lack of awareness about the student's condition as someone diagnosed with AS/HFA's Syndrome. In fact, this teacher mentioned that her department administration was aware of this student's diagnosis; however, they did not share this information with the teacher.

Therefore, it can be seen that lack of information or misinformation about AS/HFA students is a risk factor that may lead to misunderstandings, such as Teacher 3 believing that her student was just getting distracted because he did not respond to her questions in the way she expected. Despite misjudging her own student, Teacher 3 shared that it is important not to make judgments about other people's conditions, especially if teachers are not experts or do not have the necessary knowledge about students with AS-HFA, to avoid discrimination. This statement is supported by Teacher 5, who says that "sometimes there are cases in which students with different capacities are discriminated against by that (AS/HFA diagnosis)", highlighting that formerly outdated knowledge can influence perspectives in a negative manner, isolating groups of people with different capabilities and limiting their potential.

English teachers' limited awareness of their AS/HFA students' diagnosis and instructional needs shaped how they interpreted their students' behaviors, positioning AS/HFA students as problematic rather than requiring differentiated support. Teacher 2 believed that it could be "a challenge for society to include them (students with AS/HFA) in our system." Instead of viewing inclusion of all students in educational spaces as a responsibility and benefit to society, this comment reflects how insufficient knowledge can lead to deficit perspectives toward AS/HFA students. Although EL teachers generally perceived students with AS/HFA as capable of attaining high levels of English proficiency, they had insufficient information about these learners' specific needs and the corresponding instructional support in the English language classroom. As a result, this lack of knowledge perpetuated misconceptions, limited pedagogical responsiveness, and hindered equitable inclusion within the language classroom.

Toward Empowering Teachers' support in the English classroom through Informed Awareness

The second theme that emerged from the data was Toward empowering teachers' support in the English classroom through informed awareness. As can be seen in Figure 1, participating teachers underscored the dynamic relationship between information about AS/HFA students' instructional needs and the support they could provide in the English language classroom. Participating English teachers were aware of the syndrome, yet admitted that they had not received the necessary information to effectively support AS/HFA students. While empowerment was not yet evident in participants' instructional practices, the data suggest that informed awareness is a necessary condition for participants to move toward empowerment and feel capable of effectively supporting AS/HFA students.

Across participants, informed awareness was viewed as the solution to addressing the instructional needs of AS/HFA university students in English language classrooms; however, the responsibility of receiving this information was placed on external sources. English teachers from both universities expressed that they have never been formally trained on how to teach the English language to AS/HFA students, either through professional development sessions or through coursework in their teaching careers. Teacher 6 even revealed: "I don't have any research background (never made professional research about the topic) or have never attended any kind of special programming about Asperger's Syndrome." These responses show that English teachers conceptualized their role in supporting AS/HFA university students as contingent upon externally provided knowledge, rather than being active professionals constructing their own knowledge.

EL teachers who had experience teaching AS/HFA students and were aware of their students' condition reported searching for information about the syndrome; however, despite finding information about the syndrome, they still gave vague answers or even offered erroneous ideas about what strategies to use to teach AS/HFA students. For example, Teacher 1 believed that a way to help AS/HFA students is by planning activities that are "easy to understand" so they can "catch up" with the class. Unfortunately, the teachers interviewed were unable to identify additional examples of specialized accommodations that might support the academic success of students with AS/HFA in English language classrooms despite having relevant resources and information available online (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that without informed awareness, English teachers remain insufficiently empowered to provide instructional support to AS/HFA

students in the language classroom.

Discussion

According to participating teachers in this study, students diagnosed with AS/HFA can reach a high level in English. Still, it is also important for teachers to know how to differentiate instruction so that their students can attain such a level. EL teachers mustn't underestimate the cognitive capacities of students with AS/HFA, particularly when such perceptions are influenced by misinformation (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). In this study, several responses from participating English teachers reflected misinformed perceptions of AS/HFA students. This misunderstanding mirrors research conducted with general education teachers, who were unaccustomed to teaching AS/HFA students and reported that these students were more time-demanding, often got distracted in class, had difficulty transcribing notes, produced messy work at times, and finished work at slow rates (Hay & Winn, 2005). Such descriptions can cause EL teachers to see AS/HFA students as lazy or high-maintenance, leading teachers to be reluctant to work with such students. Lack of correct information about AS/HFA students can influence EL teachers' perspectives, which can ultimately lead to prejudices that can negatively affect the students by isolating them from their surrounding environment (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).

The objective of English language instruction is not to simplify the curriculum to the point of reducing its rigor, but rather to ensure comprehensibility and to foster the ability of students with AS/HFA to adapt and engage meaningfully with the language (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). This means that AS/HFA students should have specialized support or accommodations, which can be created or obtained after thorough study and research. As English is one of the most widely spoken languages globally, all students must be provided equitable access to its acquisition, with EL teachers bearing a central responsibility in facilitating this process (Safran, 2001). Within this study, participants emphasized that they did not receive information about AS/HFA students from external sources; however, it is the teacher's responsibility to inform and be informed about how best to support students' instructional needs. Having awareness about the AS/HFA students but without any concrete, evidence-based strategy to address their instructional needs can limit EL teachers' empowerment and performance in the classroom with such students. Although EL teachers in this study did not mention any instructional strategies related to language

classrooms, EL teachers can research AS/HFA students through programs, conferences, or other teachers' experiences and interactions with AS/HFA students (Adom Yeboah and Ankrah, 2017).

English teachers' perspectives of AS/HFA students can be influenced by the information they acquire through research and by the experiences gained through active classroom interactions, which in turn can construct new views and a deeper understanding of these students (Adom Yeboah & Ankrah, 2017). This illustrates the reciprocal dynamic of knowledge as both product and producer of perspective: the knowledge teachers hold shapes their perspectives, and their perspectives influence how they interpret new information and experiences. These perspectives can significantly affect the learning process and guide classroom interactions with AS/HFA students. When teachers have accurate information and relevant experiences, they are better positioned to provide meaningful support to students (Safran, 2001). This support itself becomes a source of new learning for teachers, which can be shared with colleagues or students, creating a cycle of informed practice and reflection (Wang & Derakhshan, 2021). By actively seeking knowledge and applying it in the classroom, teachers can enhance their confidence and competence, exemplifying empowerment through informed awareness (Hay and Winn, 2005).

Participating teachers did not explicitly address the implications of AS/HFA for English language teaching, highlighting a critical gap in both awareness and training (Jaffal, 2022). Therefore, this study highlights the need for formal training because experience with AS/HFA students is not enough to ensure that teachers will seek information that translates into deeper levels of understanding and support. The findings of this study also suggest that both a lack of information and limited experience working with AS/HFA students can significantly influence English teachers' perspectives, fostering misconceptions that constrain the provision of effective classroom support. Addressing this gap is essential to empower teachers to feel prepared and capable of supporting AS/HFA students effectively. Table 1 synthesizes evidence-based practices from research with AS/HFA students, along with examples of strategies and resources, to improve teachers' performance in the EFL classroom with students diagnosed with AS/HFA.

Table 1

Recommendations for Supporting AS/HFA students in English classes

Suggestions	Examples
Pay attention to the AS students' participation during the class and observe if they struggle with some language skill (Cumine et al., 1998; Krones, 2016; Safran, 2001).	Speaking and reading mostly in the case of students with Asperger's syndrome (Cumine et al., 1998; Krones, 2016; Safran, 2001).
English teachers should ask the student if they are struggling with something in the classroom (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).	Explain the meaning of certain words or sentences that can be used in a metaphorical sense (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024), Offer emotional support to improve the AS/HFA student's confidence and motivation (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).
Create an adequate workplace for AS/HFA students and allow the use of other tools and methods that engage their learning (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024; Hay & Winn, 2005).	Quiet environment without too much disruptive noise (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024; Hay & Winn, 2005). Use of computers to work (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024; Hay & Winn, 2005).
Prepare flexible lesson plans, in which students with AS/HFA's syndrome can feel comfortable to work with (Gutiérrez-Aceves, et al., 2024).	Not set a strict structure of instructions, allowing both AS/HFA students and teachers to adapt in the classroom (Gutiérrez-Aceves, et al., 2024).
English teachers should encourage	AS/HFA students learn to make use of the

students with AS/HFA's syndrome to interact more with the other students by speaking the language (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).	English language through team activities such as dialogues and debates (Gutiérrez-Aceves, et al., 2024).
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Enhances students' tolerance to make social and interpersonal relationships by making them interact with others (Gutiérrez-Aceves, et al., 2024).

Address the access to individualized support services for AS/HFA students to increase learning motivation (Beardon et al., 2009; Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024; Hay & Winn, 2005).	Employ English teachers specialized in teaching students with AS/HFA (Beardon et al., 2009; Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024; Hay & Winn, 2005).
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Support services should also include courses about the understanding of neurotypical behaviors, friendships and relationships, and social situations to the AS students (Beardon et al., 2009; Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024; Hay & Winn, 2005).
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Design training programs for the university and faculty communities (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).	Include in the ELT major a program or course that teaches English teachers-in-training how to work with AS/HFA students (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).
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Take an asset-based approach (Gutiérrez-Aceves, et al., 2024).	Emphasize strengths and areas of development through the students' inherent capabilities (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).
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Establish support networks with specialized institutions (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).	The Unit to Public Orientation (UOP), Chiapas Autism Association, Blue Center, Municipal Therapy Center and Children's
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Note: Source: Author's own.

Conclusion

This study explored perspectives from six college English teachers about students diagnosed with AS/HFA regarding their ability to learn the language and their role in supporting such students in the classroom. By centering English teachers' perspectives, this study contributed to the limited body of research on AS/HFA inclusion in university language classrooms.

Because the interviewed English teachers had not received specialized training or possessed practical strategies for AS/HFA students, their responses were often vague or generic. If this situation persists, future generations of English teachers may continue to feel unprepared, potentially becoming impatient or unmotivated to work with AS/HFA students, further contributing to the isolation of these learners within the classroom environment. It is essential to prevent this from occurring, as insufficient awareness of the characteristics of students with AS/HFA can negatively impact educational inclusion (Safran, 2001).

Findings from this study underscore the need for inclusive pedagogical strategies and targeted training programs in pre-service and in-service ELT programs, which prepare English teachers to effectively support AS/HFA students (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024). As part of inclusive education, it is the institution's responsibility to prepare teachers through workshops, accessible resources, and curricular changes that include neurodiversity, particularly AS/HFA, within language teaching education programs so English teachers can support students in a more effective, respectful, and responsible way (Gutiérrez-Aceves et al., 2024).

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, which include a small sample size, lack of student perspectives, and variation in teachers' exposure to AS/HFA students. Future research recommendations include implementing inclusion strategies for AS/HFA students in English classrooms, as well as considering how language assessments can be adapted for students with AS/HFA

by using new language standards. In addition, future research can explore the role of local or national inclusion policies in shaping teacher attitudes and practices.

As researchers, we encourage and challenge English language teachers to recognize that, like all learners, students with AS/HFA have their own strengths and weaknesses. Although teaching these students may present some challenges, effective instruction is achievable when teachers actively engage in professional development. By promoting informed perspectives and sharing information among EL teachers, students with AS/HFA can be included, supported, and empowered as capable English language learners within diverse classrooms.

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