

FLUENCY AND COMPETENCY IN EFL: A MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY OF NEUROTYPICAL AND NEURODIVERGENT LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has increasingly recognized that individual cognitive differences influence language learning; however, neurodiversity remains underexplored, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. This study investigates how neurotypical and neurodivergent learners differ in oral fluency, communicative competence, and English language learning experiences. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study design, the research involved six Indonesian EFL learners comprising three neurotypical participants and three neurodivergent participants diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using Automaticity Theory, the Communicative Competence Framework, and Executive Function Theory. The findings indicate that neurotypical learners generally achieved fluent language production through repeated exposure and stable automatic language processing, although anxiety and formal situations occasionally disrupted speech production. In contrast, neurodivergent learners demonstrated more diverse pathways toward fluency, influenced by differences in attention regulation, working memory, sensory processing, and cognitive flexibility. They frequently employed individualized compensatory strategies to maintain communication. Differences were also identified in discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence, illustrating how learners adapted communication according to their cognitive profiles. Rather than portraying neurodivergence as a deficit, the findings highlight alternative cognitive pathways that support successful EFL learning and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of second language acquisition.

Keywords: Neurodiversity; English as a Foreign Language; Oral Fluency; Communicative Competence; Second Language Acquisition

Abstrak

Penelitian Second Language Acquisition (SLA) semakin mengakui bahwa perbedaan kognitif individu memengaruhi pembelajaran bahasa. Namun, neurodiversitas masih belum banyak diteliti, khususnya dalam konteks English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji perbedaan kefasihan lisan, kompetensi komunikatif, dan pengalaman belajar bahasa Inggris antara pembelajar neurotipikal dan neurodivergen. Penelitian menggunakan desain studi kasus ganda kualitatif yang

melibatkan enam pembelajar EFL di Indonesia, terdiri atas tiga partisipan neurotipikal dan tiga partisipan neurodivergen dengan diagnosis autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dan disleksia. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan Teori Otomatisasi, Kerangka Kompetensi Komunikatif, dan Teori Fungsi Eksekutif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajar neurotipikal umumnya mencapai kefasihan melalui paparan berulang dan pemrosesan bahasa yang relatif otomatis, meskipun kecemasan dan situasi formal terkadang mengganggu produksi ujaran. Sebaliknya, pembelajar neurodivergen menunjukkan jalur perkembangan kefasihan yang lebih beragam karena dipengaruhi oleh regulasi perhatian, memori kerja, pemrosesan sensorik, dan fleksibilitas kognitif. Mereka juga mengembangkan berbagai strategi kompensasi untuk mempertahankan komunikasi. Perbedaan turut ditemukan pada kompetensi wacana, sosiolinguistik, dan strategis yang menunjukkan bagaimana setiap pembelajar menyesuaikan komunikasi sesuai karakteristik kognitifnya. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa neurodivergensi tidak merepresentasikan suatu defisit, melainkan jalur kognitif alternatif yang memungkinkan keberhasilan dalam pembelajaran EFL dan memperluas pemahaman yang lebih inklusif mengenai pemerolehan bahasa kedua.

Kata kunci: Neurodiversitas; English as a Foreign Language; Kefasihan lisan; Kompetensi Komunikatif; Second Language Acquisition

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1. Introduction

English has become the dominant language of international communication, education, science, and professional interaction, making English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficiency increasingly important worldwide. Consequently, understanding how learners acquire, process, and use English has become a major concern in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and psycholinguistic research. Although language learning has often been explained through relatively uniform developmental models, increasing evidence suggests that learners differ considerably in the cognitive processes that support second language acquisition. Individual differences in attention regulation, memory, language processing, and executive control may influence how learners develop oral fluency and communicative competence, particularly among individuals with diverse neurological profiles.

The neurodiversity paradigm conceptualizes neurological differences as natural variations in human cognition rather than deficits. Within this perspective, conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia represent distinctive cognitive profiles that may influence language processing, communication, and learning strategies. Previous studies have demonstrated that neurodivergent learners often experience second language learning differently from neurotypical learners because of variations in executive functioning, attention regulation, and sensory processing. However, existing research has largely examined single neurodevelopmental conditions, particularly ADHD, relied on quantitative or intervention-based approaches, and rarely compared neurotypical and neurodivergent learners within the same qualitative framework. As a result, the cognitive processes underlying differences in language learning remain insufficiently understood.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study to compare neurotypical and neurodivergent EFL learners in terms of oral fluency, communicative competence, and English language learning experiences. Drawing on Automaticity Theory, the Communicative Competence Framework, and Executive Function Theory, this study explores how different neurological profiles shape language processing and communication. Rather than viewing neurodivergence as a limitation, the study highlights diverse cognitive pathways through which learners achieve successful language use. The findings are expected to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of second language acquisition and provide insights into how cognitive diversity influences EFL learning.

2. Literature Review

Oral fluency is an important aspect of second language learning because it reflects learners' ability to produce language smoothly, efficiently, and with limited hesitation. In EFL learning, the development of oral fluency is closely related to how efficiently learners can retrieve vocabulary, organize linguistic information, and produce utterances during communication. As learners gain

greater experience with English through repeated exposure and use, language production may require less conscious attention and become increasingly efficient. Therefore, understanding the development of oral fluency requires consideration of the cognitive processes involved in moving from effortful language processing toward more automatic language production.

2.1 Automaticity and Oral Fluency in EFL Learning

Oral fluency is commonly associated with the development of automatic language processing. According to Schneider and Shiffrin's (1977) Automaticity Theory, language learning progresses from controlled processing, which requires conscious attention and cognitive effort, to automatic processing achieved through repeated practice and exposure. In second language acquisition (SLA), learners who attain automaticity retrieve lexical items and construct utterances more efficiently, allowing them to communicate with greater speed and fewer disruptions. Consequently, oral fluency is not solely reflected in speech rate but also in the cognitive efficiency underlying language production.

However, the development of automaticity may differ across learners with different neurological profiles. Variations in attention regulation, sensory processing, working memory, and cognitive flexibility can influence how language becomes automatized. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency, these differences may represent alternative pathways through which neurodivergent learners achieve fluent communication. Therefore, Automaticity Theory provides an appropriate framework for examining differences in oral fluency between neurotypical and neurodivergent EFL learners.

2.2 Communicative Competence and Neurodiversity

While fluency reflects the efficiency of language processing, successful communication also requires communicative competence. Hymes (1972) argued that language users must understand not only grammatical rules but also how to use language appropriately in different social contexts. Expanding this concept, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed four interconnected components of

communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Together, these components explain how speakers organize ideas, adapt language to social contexts, maintain coherent interaction, and overcome communication difficulties.

The framework is particularly relevant to neurodiversity because neurodivergent learners often display uneven patterns of communicative competence. Previous studies suggest that learners with autism, ADHD, or dyslexia may demonstrate strengths in some communicative domains while experiencing challenges in others. For example, learners may compensate for discourse or sociolinguistic difficulties by relying on strategic competence, enabling them to maintain effective communication despite cognitive differences. Accordingly, communicative competence offers a comprehensive perspective for examining language use beyond grammatical accuracy or speech fluency alone.

2.3 Executive Function in Second Language Learning

Executive Function Theory explains how higher-order cognitive processes regulate learning and communication. Miyake et al. (2000) describe executive functions as including attention regulation, working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility, all of which contribute to goal-directed behavior and language processing. These cognitive processes enable learners to manage attention, organize linguistic information, monitor speech production, and adapt communication to changing contexts.

Because executive functions differ among individuals, they play an important role in explaining variation in EFL learning experiences. Neurodivergent learners frequently develop individualized strategies to manage cognitive demands during language learning, suggesting that executive functioning influences not only language performance but also the ways learners approach communication and problem-solving. Executive Function Theory therefore complements

Automaticity Theory and the Communicative Competence Framework by explaining the cognitive mechanisms that underlie differences in language learning across neurological profiles.

2.4 Previous Studies and Research Gap

Previous research has demonstrated that neurodiversity influences second language learning; however, important gaps remain. Marashi and Dolatdoost (2016) found that learners with ADHD exhibited lower oral fluency than neurotypical learners, highlighting the influence of attention regulation on speech production. Kałdonek-Crnjaković (2024) further reported that executive functioning affected learners' communicative performance in EFL classrooms, while Salehi et al. (2024) showed that adaptive instructional strategies could improve oral fluency among learners with ADHD. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they primarily focus on a single neurodevelopmental condition, emphasize observable performance or intervention outcomes, and rarely compare neurotypical and neurodivergent learners within the same qualitative framework.

To address these limitations, the present study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study comparing neurotypical learners with learners diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and dyslexia. By integrating Automaticity Theory, the Communicative Competence Framework, and Executive Function Theory, this study investigates how neurological diversity shapes oral fluency, communicative competence, and English language learning experiences. This integrated psycholinguistic perspective contributes to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of EFL learning among learners with diverse cognitive profiles.

3. Method

This study was designed within a qualitative paradigm that emphasizes the exploration of lived experiences, meanings, and individual differences in language learning processes. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the focus of the study is not to measure performance numerically, but to understand how neurotypical and neurodivergent learners experience, perceive,

and develop English oral fluency and communicative competence in real-life learning contexts. This approach allows for rich, contextualized insights into cognitive and linguistic variation that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to investigate differences in oral fluency, communicative competence, and English language learning experiences between neurotypical and neurodivergent English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. A multiple-case study was selected because it enables in-depth exploration of individual experiences while facilitating cross-case comparisons across participants with different neurological profiles. Following Yin (2018), each participant was treated as a separate case, allowing similarities and differences to be identified before developing broader analytical interpretations. The study was informed by three complementary theoretical frameworks: Automaticity Theory (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977), the Communicative Competence Framework (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980), and Executive Function Theory (Miyake et al., 2000).

3.2 Data and Data Source

The study involved six Indonesian EFL learners selected through purposive sampling. Three participants were neurotypical learners, while three were neurodivergent learners diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. The inclusion of these participants enabled comparisons across different cognitive profiles while maintaining a manageable number of cases for in-depth qualitative analysis.

The primary data consisted of participants' verbal responses obtained through semi-structured interviews. To enhance the credibility of participants' neurological profiles, parental confirmation was obtained for two neurodivergent participants, while one participant provided documentation confirming a previous diagnosis. Interview transcripts served as the principal data source for analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian and English, depending on participants' preferences and communicative comfort. The interview protocol was designed to explore three aspects of English language learning: (1) oral fluency development, (2) communicative competence, and (3) learning experiences related to executive functioning. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their language learning experiences, communication strategies, perceived challenges, and adaptive approaches during English learning.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. During data collection, reflective field notes were also maintained to document contextual information, participant behavior, and interview dynamics that supported data interpretation.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis within a multiple-case study framework. The interview transcripts were first read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Meaningful excerpts related to the research questions were then coded and organized into preliminary categories. Similar codes were grouped into broader themes representing patterns across participants.

The identified themes were interpreted through the three theoretical frameworks adopted in this study. Automaticity Theory was used to examine patterns of oral fluency development, the Communicative Competence Framework guided the analysis of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, and Executive Function Theory explained how attention regulation, working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility influenced participants' English learning experiences. Finally, cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify recurring similarities and distinctive characteristics between neurotypical and neurodivergent learners, allowing analytical conclusions to be developed across all cases.

4. Results

The thematic analysis identified three major themes reflecting differences and similarities between neurotypical and neurodivergent EFL learners: (1) oral fluency development, (2) communicative competence, and (3) the influence of executive function on English language learning. Although participants from both groups achieved functional English proficiency through sustained exposure and practice, their experiences revealed different cognitive pathways toward language learning and communication.

4.1 Oral Fluency Development

The interview findings indicate that both neurotypical and neurodivergent learners developed oral fluency through continuous exposure to English. However, the processes through which fluency was achieved differed between the two groups.

Neurotypical participants generally described English production as becoming increasingly automatic through frequent use and exposure. They reported that they no longer translated mentally before speaking and were able to retrieve vocabulary and construct sentences with relatively little conscious effort. Nevertheless, several participants noted that anxiety, formal speaking situations, or unfamiliar communicative contexts occasionally disrupted their fluency, resulting in hesitation or temporary difficulty expressing their thoughts. Despite these interruptions, they perceived such experiences as situational rather than persistent.

In contrast, neurodivergent participants reported more varied experiences in developing oral fluency. Differences in attention regulation, processing speed, sensory experiences, and working memory frequently influenced their ability to maintain fluent speech. Participants described occasionally losing track of conversations, rereading written texts, or requiring additional time to organize their ideas before responding. Rather than preventing communication, these challenges encouraged them to develop individualized strategies such as repeated exposure, rehearsal, paraphrasing, and structured learning routines that supported fluent language production.

Overall, the findings suggest that while both groups attained oral fluency, neurotypical learners generally experienced relatively stable automatic language processing, whereas neurodivergent learners followed more individualized pathways shaped by their cognitive characteristics and adaptive learning strategies.

4.2 Communicative Competence

The findings also revealed differences in how participants used English to communicate effectively across different situations. Although all participants demonstrated the ability to convey meaning successfully, the strategies they employed varied according to their individual learning experiences and cognitive profiles.

Neurotypical participants generally reported confidence in adapting their language according to different communicative situations. They described selecting vocabulary appropriately, organizing ideas coherently, and adjusting their language when interacting with different interlocutors. Communication difficulties were primarily associated with temporary nervousness or unfamiliar contexts rather than limitations in language use.

Neurodivergent participants likewise demonstrated effective communication; however, they more frequently described challenges in maintaining discourse, interpreting implied meanings, or responding spontaneously during conversations. To compensate, participants reported relying on familiar vocabulary, paraphrasing, requesting clarification, or allowing additional time to formulate responses. These strategies enabled them to maintain communication despite experiencing greater cognitive demands during interaction.

Across both groups, communicative competence extended beyond grammatical knowledge alone. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of adapting communication according to context and developing personal strategies that enabled successful interaction in English.

4.3 Executive Function in English Language Learning

Executive functioning emerged as an important factor shaping participants' English learning experiences. The findings indicate that differences in attention regulation, working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility influenced not only language processing but also the strategies participants employed while learning and using English.

Neurotypical participants generally described maintaining consistent attention during learning activities and organizing their study routines without substantial difficulty. Although distractions occasionally affected concentration, they were typically able to refocus and continue learning without major disruption. They also reported that repeated exposure gradually increased their confidence and fluency.

By comparison, neurodivergent participants described executive functioning as having a greater influence on their learning experiences. Participants reported fluctuations in attention, difficulties sustaining focus, rereading learning materials, becoming distracted by environmental stimuli, or requiring structured routines to remain engaged. Some participants also explained that changes in learning environments or communication contexts demanded additional cognitive effort before they could participate comfortably.

Despite these challenges, neurodivergent learners consistently demonstrated adaptive approaches to English learning. They described establishing structured routines, using multimedia resources, reviewing material repeatedly, minimizing distractions, and selecting learning environments that suited their cognitive preferences. These individualized strategies enabled participants to regulate cognitive demands while continuing to develop their English proficiency.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that neurotypical and neurodivergent learners achieved successful English language learning through different cognitive pathways. While neurotypical learners generally reported more stable language processing and learning experiences, neurodivergent learners relied on diverse compensatory strategies that reflected their individual

cognitive characteristics. These findings illustrate that successful EFL learning can emerge through multiple adaptive pathways rather than a single uniform process.

5. Discussion

The present study explored differences in oral fluency, communicative competence, and English language learning experiences between neurotypical and neurodivergent EFL learners. The findings demonstrate that although both groups successfully developed English proficiency, they followed different cognitive pathways toward achieving fluent and effective communication. These differences can be understood through the combined perspectives of Automaticity Theory, the Communicative Competence Framework, and Executive Function Theory.

The findings regarding oral fluency support the central premise of Automaticity Theory (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977), which proposes that repeated practice gradually transforms controlled processing into automatic processing. Neurotypical participants generally described English production as occurring with minimal conscious effort, suggesting that repeated exposure enabled efficient lexical retrieval and speech production. Nevertheless, their reports also indicate that automaticity was not entirely stable. Situations involving anxiety, formal presentations, or social pressure temporarily reactivated controlled processing, resulting in hesitation and reduced fluency. These findings suggest that automatic language processing remains sensitive to contextual demands even among highly proficient learners.

The experiences of neurodivergent participants extend this theoretical perspective by demonstrating that automaticity may develop through more diverse cognitive pathways. Rather than progressing toward consistently automatic language production, participants described fluctuations in attention, working memory, and processing speed that influenced speech production. Instead of preventing successful communication, these cognitive differences encouraged learners to develop individualized compensatory strategies such as rehearsal, repeated exposure, paraphrasing, and structured learning routines. These findings support the view that fluency should not be understood

solely as rapid automatic processing but also as the ability to sustain communication through adaptive cognitive strategies. Consequently, the findings broaden the application of Automaticity Theory by illustrating that multiple pathways may lead to effective oral communication among learners with different neurological profiles.

The findings concerning communicative competence further demonstrate that successful communication extends beyond speech fluency. Consistent with Hymes (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence involves grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence operating simultaneously during interaction. Neurotypical participants generally demonstrated relatively balanced development across these components, enabling them to adapt language appropriately to different communicative situations. Their communication difficulties were primarily associated with contextual factors rather than persistent linguistic limitations.

By comparison, neurodivergent participants demonstrated greater variability across the components of communicative competence. Although grammatical competence was generally comparable to that of neurotypical learners, participants more frequently reported challenges related to discourse organization, interpretation of implicit meaning, and adaptation to changing conversational contexts. Strategic competence therefore emerged as an important mechanism supporting successful communication. Participants consistently relied on paraphrasing, clarification requests, familiar vocabulary, and self-monitoring to compensate for temporary communication difficulties. These findings reinforce the importance of evaluating communicative competence as a multidimensional construct rather than relying exclusively on grammatical accuracy or speech fluency. They also demonstrate that effective communication may be achieved through different combinations of communicative competencies depending on learners' cognitive characteristics.

Executive Function Theory provides further explanation for these differences by highlighting the role of higher-order cognitive processes in language learning. The findings indicate that attention regulation, working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility influenced not only

participants' language performance but also the learning strategies they employed throughout English acquisition. Neurotypical participants generally described relatively stable executive functioning, allowing them to maintain consistent learning routines and regulate attention effectively during communication. Conversely, neurodivergent participants identified executive functioning as a central factor influencing their learning experiences, particularly when sustaining attention, organizing information, or adapting to unfamiliar communicative situations.

Despite these cognitive differences, neurodivergent participants demonstrated considerable adaptability by developing personalized strategies that reduced cognitive demands during language learning. Structured routines, multimedia exposure, repeated review, and environmental adjustments enabled participants to compensate for executive functioning differences while maintaining progress in English learning. These findings support previous research emphasizing the importance of executive functioning in second language acquisition while also demonstrating that neurodivergent learners actively construct effective learning strategies suited to their individual cognitive profiles.

Taken together, the findings contribute to a more inclusive understanding of second language acquisition by demonstrating that neurotypical and neurodivergent learners achieve successful English communication through different, yet equally meaningful, cognitive pathways. Rather than conceptualizing neurodivergence as a deficit, the present study illustrates how cognitive diversity shapes language processing, communicative competence, and learning strategies in distinctive ways. Integrating Automaticity Theory, the Communicative Competence Framework, and Executive Function Theory provides a comprehensive explanation of these differences and highlights the importance of recognizing diverse cognitive profiles within EFL research and practice.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated differences in oral fluency, communicative competence, and English language learning experiences between neurotypical and neurodivergent EFL learners through a qualitative multiple-case study. The findings demonstrate that although both groups were able to

achieve successful English communication, they reached this outcome through different cognitive pathways. Neurotypical learners generally developed oral fluency through relatively stable automatic language processing supported by repeated exposure and language use. In contrast, neurodivergent learners experienced greater variation in attention regulation, working memory, sensory processing, and cognitive flexibility, resulting in more individualized approaches to language learning and communication.

The findings further reveal that communicative competence cannot be evaluated solely through grammatical accuracy or speech fluency. Neurodivergent learners frequently relied on strategic competence and personalized compensatory strategies to maintain effective communication, demonstrating that successful language use is shaped by both linguistic knowledge and cognitive adaptation. These findings support a more inclusive understanding of second language acquisition by recognizing that different neurological profiles may lead to equally effective, although distinct, pathways toward English proficiency.

The study contributes to psycholinguistic and EFL research by integrating Automaticity Theory, the Communicative Competence Framework, and Executive Function Theory to explain how cognitive diversity influences language learning. Rather than conceptualizing neurodivergence as a deficit, the findings emphasize learners' adaptive capacities and highlight the importance of recognizing individual cognitive differences in language education.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that EFL instruction should adopt more flexible and inclusive teaching practices that accommodate diverse learning needs. Providing varied instructional approaches, opportunities for individualized learning strategies, and supportive classroom environments may enable both neurotypical and neurodivergent learners to develop their communicative abilities more effectively.

Future research may extend the present study by involving larger and more diverse participant groups, incorporating classroom observations alongside interviews, and examining additional

neurodevelopmental profiles. Such studies would contribute to a broader understanding of neurodiversity in second language acquisition and support the development of more inclusive language teaching practices.

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