

Language profiles, learning experiences, and quality of life of multilingual autistic university students in Poland

Background: Despite the current prevalence of multilingualism, research with multilingual participants is a developing field of study, especially as far as autistic individuals are concerned (Lim et al., 2025). Autistic multilinguals come from diverse linguistic backgrounds; however, their lived experiences remain understudied, which may result in inadequate support for autistic people in language education. Furthermore, existing research has largely relied on caregiver reports, leaving the perspectives of autistic multilinguals themselves insufficiently explored (Digard et al., 2020; Nolte et al., 2021).

Aim: Our research project aims to investigate the relationship between autism, multilingualism, and the social life quality of multilingual autistic university students, analysing their autistic traits, language profiles, learning experiences, and self-reported life quality.

Participants: We recruited 39 multilingual autistic adults enrolled in philology or modern languages programmes at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland. Following the recommendations of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (2021), both clinically diagnosed ($n=9$, 23.1%) and self-identifying autistic individuals ($n=30$, 76.9%) were included in the study. The respondents were mostly female ($n=26$, 66.7%), although there was a smaller number of male ($n=6$, 15.4%) and non-binary ($n=4$, 10.3%) participants. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 31 years ($M = 22.10$, $SD = 2.57$).

Measures: The respondents were asked to complete two online questionnaires. The first questionnaire was a modified version of the Autism and Bilingualism Census (Digard et al., 2020) supplemented with multiple choice and open-ended questions regarding foreign language learning in a higher education context. The second questionnaire was the Ritvo Autism Asperger Diagnostic Scale-Revised (RAADS-R) (Ritvo et al., 2011), which is a self-reported measure of traits associated with autism, including language use and social relatedness.

Results: In terms of language profiles, 22 individuals (56.4%) were bilingual and 17 (43.6%) spoke more than two languages. Native speakers of Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Norwegian, Mandarin, and Italian were represented in the study. The participants' RAADS-R scores demonstrated traits consistent with autism, with pronounced traits on the language and sensory-motor subscales.

The thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019) of open-ended responses yielded the following themes: 'situational stress and challenges', 'language learning facilitators', 'use of accommodations', and 'benefits of multilingualism'. The participants indicated stress resulting from social interaction, sensory sensitivities, the intense pace of learning, and having to focus on multiple languages or competences simultaneously. They articulated a need for a range of adjustments, such as extended deadlines, changes to the exam format, accommodations for sensory needs, and opportunities to compensate for absences. The responses demonstrated that the participants framed multilingualism as beneficial for social inclusion and self-expression, while foreign languages were perceived as a means of accessing media, engaging in hobbies, and broadening one's knowledge about autism. During the presentation, our current findings will be supplemented with more detailed qualitative data elicited during semi-structured interviews with a subset of 10 participants.

Word count: 463

We would deeply appreciate it if our work could be reviewed by scholars exploring the interaction between multilingualism and neurodiversity, such as Dr Bérengère Digard, Dr Rachael Davis, and Dr Franziska Köder.

Keywords: autism, multilingualism, foreign language learning, life quality

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