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FROM CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS: SUPPORTING AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER STUDENT'S FINAL PROJECT JOURNEY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The study intends to explore the dynamics of a student with autism spectrum disorder in completing his product-based final project to graduate from an English education department and to identify the strategies that effectively facilitated this student to do so. It was conducted due to the scarcity of research studies reporting the step-by-step sucess journey of students with ASD in completing their degrees. It employed teacher action research using the final project advisor's observation of the participant during all consultation sessions, her journal detailing her reflections on the participant's step-by-step progress and the participant's consultation log. The study was conducted from February 15 to February 2, 2024. Regarding the participant's dynamic in completing his final project, this study found that seventeen consultation meetings in one semester were needed to create the instructional video, while it took twenty consultation meetings in the next semester to guide him to write his final project report. The study found six strategies to help the participant complete his final project. These were allowing him to do one thing at a time, focusing on tasks within his competence, using repetition techniques for his comprehension, using oral feedback and tutorials instead of written ones, giving onsite consultation instead of online, and accompanying him in challenging tasks. Educators in other contexts may implement or adapt these strategies to facilitate the learning of students with ASD, taking into account both the similarities to and differences from the participant in the present study.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is developmental disability where unusual pattern of development takes place early in childhood and lasts throughout one's life (Joon et al., 2021). Studies indicate that the number of people with ASD is increasing. For example, a recent review study by Roy and Strate (2023) indicated the prevalence rate of ASD was .38% in Germany, 1.55% in Spain, 1.70-1.85% in the US, with the estimated global median prevalence of ASD at 1%, indicating the widespread of ASD worldwide. In Asia, a rather old yet relevant study by Sun and Allison (2010) suggested the increasing prevalence of children with ASD in Taiwan, China, Japan, Iran, and Israel. In Indonesia, unfortunately, a recent reliable database on Indonesian people with ASD is unavailable. However, recently, the Deputy Minister of Health stated that around 2.4 million Indonesian children have ASD, and the prevalence is increasing. It is estimated that one among 100 children in Indonesia has ASD (Stefanni, 2024).

Clinical signs of those with ASD can be divided into two main domains: social and behavioral. In the social domain, those with ASD typically have impaired social communication and interaction skills. Behaviorally, they tend to have restricted and repetitive patterns of activities and interests (Dockrell et al., 2014). As the name suggests, ASD ranges in a spectrum from mild to severe. Hence, depending on their spectrum, the severity of the ASD symptoms may vary from one person with ASD to another (Cancino & Tomicic, 2023).

Wherever a person with ASD is placed within the spectrum ranging from mild to severe, these persons with ASD always have tried of impairments to varying degrees (Wire, 2005). In ASD, there is always a degree of impairment in social interaction. Hence, those with ASD struggle with social interactions and thus often cause discomfort and unintentionally offensive responses. Secondly, they lack usual and typical social communication. Their voices may be too soft or too loud. Their speech may be too brief or long-winded. The third aspect of the triad is the lack of flexibility. Those with ASD tend to have difficulty coping with change and prefer repetitive and predictable activities. The author further mentioned that teachers should acknowledge this triad to understand their ASD students better and more effectively help them.

Furthermore, several typical characteristics of ASD students can pose challenges for them to thrive in academic settings. First, they struggle with practical language skills and find understanding unwritten language rules difficult. Because of that, they likely face difficulty using language effectively in social situations (Brown et al., 2014). Second, such students also have poor Theory of Mind, the significant consequence of which is difficulty understanding others' perspectives. They struggle to understand mental states such as desires, beliefs, and intentions. Hence, students with ASD could have trouble understanding others' thoughts and feelings as well as empathizing (Colle et al., 2008). Third, those with ASD tend to have impaired global processing skills. Therefore, they struggle to see the overall picture or comprehend the main points as well as integrate information to form a complete understanding (Brown et al., 2014). Hashim et al. (2021, 2022) conducted a study involving ASD children, teachers, therapists. The studies generally found that those with ASD struggled with social interactions and had cognitive disabilities.

Having these aforementioned characteristics, ASD students typically have difficulty excelling academically, especially in language learning or programs. For example, in language classes that require students to write, ASD students may not be able to produce as coherent and comprehensible written products as their typically developing peers (Brown & Klein, 2011). The texts they produce lack focus and do not have smooth transitions between ideas (Finnegan & Accardo, 2017). Cognitively, writing, based on the Revised Bloom Taxonomy, belongs to the sixth or highest level of cognitive dimension – creating, necessitating the ability to analyze (Level 4) and evaluate (Level 5) beforehand (Anderson et al., 2001). In this regard, ASD students typically could not go beyond Level 3 (applying). Though conducted in a general higher education context, a study by Bakker et al. (2023) reported that students with autism had a higher rate of no-shows during their second year compared to their peers, which impacted their degree completion after three years. This finding suggests that students with ASD may require more time to complete their university degree. To facilitate students with ASD, a possible way is to implement differentiated instruction.

In an old yet relevant publication, Tomlinson et al. (2003) stated that three main elements should be considered when implementing differentiated instruction: 1) content, 2) process, and 3) product. While content focuses on what students are expected to learn or master, the process refers to the activities designed to facilitate learning the content. Next, product refers to the expectation that should be achieved by the students at the end of the instruction. The authors further asserted that differentiated instruction can be tailored as a response to student readiness, interest, and learning profile. Hence, teachers should identify their students' readiness or level, what interests them, and their characteristics to provide effective instruction. In the context of

teaching students with ASD, teachers can identify their characteristics and interests to be leveraged for learning and mitigate the possible effects of the learning deficiencies associated with ASD. For example, knowing her ASD student participant's tendency to anxiety, Kurniawati (2020) implemented a personalized learning method to help the participant learn English grammar. The pace of the instruction should also be adjusted in response to students' needs (Tomlinson et al., 2003). In the case of ASD students, it can be achieved by giving them more time to complete specific tasks (Subekti & Lestariningsih, 2023).

Despite the increasing number of ASD children, and thus students, in Indonesia, research on ASD is generally quite limited. Some of the available studies on ASD in university contexts focused on facilitating ASD students' learning of grammar (Kurniawati, 2020), vocabulary (Subekti, 2020b), and writing (Subekti, 2020a; Subekti & Lestariningsih, 2023), as well as seeing teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding teaching ASD students (Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020). Some of the findings of these studies generally found that ASD students may struggle to perform as well as their peers within a given timeframe. However, they could still achieve their learning targets with additional guidance and innovative teaching methods, albeit requiring more time. The guidance and innovations take various forms; for instance, to channel an ASD student's preference for repetitive activities, differentiated instruction involves having the student create vocabulary cards, which are then used for memorization (Subekti, 2020b). Other strategies that have been reported to benefit ASD students' learning also include using personalized learning to ease ASD students' anxiety while learning (Kurniawati, 2020) and using their mother tongue (L1) to facilitate comprehension (Subekti, 2020a). These findings suggested that differentiated instruction in various forms has successfully facilitated ASD students' learning. Some other studies in lower education levels revealed that guiding students or children with ASD was challenging for parents, and it, at times, made them feel inadequate and anxious about the future (Nurussakinah et al., 2024; Shidqi, 2024). This finding indicates that in the ASD issue, it is not only the ones having it who struggle but also people around them, suggesting the importance of more research on ASD to understand it better and to facilitate those with it better.

Despite the availability of studies on ASD at the university level, to the best of our knowledge, there have not been any empirical studies that investigate the dynamics of ASD students to complete their theses or final projects as the last requirement to graduate from a bachelor's degree program. Several news articles have written about the success of students with ASD in obtaining their degrees (detikNews, 2014; Tito, 2019). However, research studies documenting such students' journey to graduating are still lacking. Such studies could benefit both practitioners and researchers in the field of ASD to better understand ASD students' step-by-step dynamics as well as their teachers' continual strategies to facilitate them throughout the process.

Related to this, in the case of the higher education system in Indonesia, students in an undergraduate program are typically expected to write and defend a thesis or a final project after completing all the required courses to graduate. This was also the case in an English Language Education Department in Indonesia, where Gerrald, a pseudonym, studied. For him, this was a huge challenge, considering his mental condition as a person with ASD. One of his teachers was assigned as his final project advisor to guide him through this 'almost impossible' journey of designing a product-based final project, creating the product, writing the final project report, and defending it to the examiners. Previously, Gerrald succeeded in creating an instructional video during the pandemic semester's teaching practice assignment in an inclusive school under the guidance of his advisor. Considering this success story, the teachers believed he could create another instructional video for his final project. Moreover, a litany of studies have overwhelmingly suggested various challenges ASD students face (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020). Thus, a research study showcasing the academic strengths of ASD students in postsecondary settings could encourage further studies that highlight ASD in a more optimistic light.

For that purpose, this article intends to share the journey between a college student with ASD and his Final Project advisor, to fulfill the last requirement to graduate. This study focuses on answering the following research questions. First, how are the dynamics of the student with ASD in completing his product-based final project? Second, what strategies can effectively help this student complete his product-based final project?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed teacher action research. Action research is a study where researchers identify problems in a particular context and try to find solutions to the problems (Mertler, 2019). It is designed to directly improve practice and respond to specific classroom challenges (Lufungulo et al., 2021). In the education context, teachers identify problems faced by their students and work on the solutions. In this study, the selection of teacher action research aligns with the study's aim to identify and implement effective strategies for supporting the student with ASD. Compared to other qualitative methods such as case studies and ethnographies, teacher action research was specifically chosen due to its unique emphasis on practical problem-solving and immediate implementation of strategies.

Regarding the action research necessitating the identification of the issue, before the present study was conducted, we, as the researchers, identified the potential problem.

In the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year, there was a student with ASD who was about to take either Thesis or Final Project, the last 'class' he needed to pass to graduate from the English Language Education Department. Then, this student, Gerrald (pseudonym), was in the sixth year and twelfth semester of his study. All his friends from the same batch had graduated from the four-year bachelor program by then. Gerrald often had to retake some courses throughout his study because he did not pass the courses on his first attempt. Completing either a thesis or final project may be very challenging, and even impossible unless innovation was done and help given throughout his process of completing his final project. For this reason, his academic advisor advised him to take product-based Final Project instead of Thesis as the last course to take to graduate as it was seen as more doable, though still challenging.

To help Gerrald complete his final project, an advisor, was assigned to guide him along the way, giving him the necessary support. The advisor's actions can be categorized as differentiated instruction, as she provided step-by-step guidance and closely monitored his progress. In contrast, for final project consultations with typically developing students in the department, the students usually take the initiative, while their advisors primarily offer guidance and feedback during the typical 6-8 consultation sessions per semester.

Participants and Setting

The participant of this study was a 28-year-old student with ASD. In 2020, he was examined for psychological examination by a professional psychologist. The results suggested that he struggled in tasks requiring logical and associative thinking. He also lacked abstract concept-making. He was also unable to process a series of information or instructions at a time. However, he may excel in practical and clerical work and have a good memory of things he was interested in and familiar with. He had a high motivation and perseverance. From his teachers' observations of his behaviors throughout his study, it can also be seen that Gerrald cared for his achievement and grades. Often, when he thought he performed poorly in class, his anxiety kicked in, saying anxiously, "[If I get poor grades like this], [I am] scared of [being] unable to join the graduation ceremony on time." Previously, Gerrald received differentiated instruction in vocabulary and writing classes, which may have been crucial for his success. For instance, in writing classes, he was given additional time to complete essays of the same length as his typically developing peers. Hence, it can be said that Gerrald was quite familiar with the differentiated instruction provided by his teachers at this point as it was not the first time for him.

The study was conducted in an English Language Education Department in Java, Indonesia. The department allows students to choose a thesis or final project as the last course required as a partial fulfillment for obtaining a bachelor's degree. A thesis is an academic writing project based on empirical research, and a final project can be research-based or product-based. For Gerrald, their teachers saw completing a product-based final project as a more feasible target despite the possibility that he would still need extra guidance. Based on recommendations from Gerald's previous teachers, his academic advisor suggested he undertake a product-based final project and shared this suggestion with his parents, who agreed. In short, Gerrald was required to design an instructional media based on needs analysis with a related party and report what he had made in a final report. Next, he must defend his final project, including the product and the report, before three examiners and receive their approval. Only then could he obtain the Final Project grade and graduate from the program.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted from February 15, 2023, up to February 2, 2024, the period Gerrald needed to finish his product-based final project. The data were obtained from the advisor's observation of the participant during all the consultation sessions, her journal, and the participant's consultation log detailing the time, points of consultations, Gerrald's action plans, and the advisor's comments on whether a specific target had been completed. These instruments were developed to capture Gerrald's progress in completing his final project and the strategies used to support him throughout the process. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation. The data were analyzed continuously throughout Gerrald's process of completing his final project by using annotations on the documents or writing separate notes as necessary. We familiarized ourselves with the data through an initial reading, making preliminary notes on emerging themes. We then developed codes based on the research questions. These codes were then refined and grouped into broader themes in accordance with the research questions. The results are reported descriptively based on the research questions to provide Gerrald's detailed journey.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The dynamics of the student with ASD in completing his product-based final project

Accumulatively, the dynamics to guide Gerrald took two full semesters and an additional two months into the third semester to complete his product-based final project, including the product itself and the report. Table 1 illustrates the general timeline of Gerrald's process in completing his final project.

Table 1
General Timeline of Gerrald's Process of Completing the Final Project

No	Semester	Gerrald's Progress
1.	Second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year (February 15 – July 25, 2023)	Starting and finishing the creation of the instructional video
2.	First semester of the 2023-2024 academic year (July 31 – November 21, 2023)	Starting and finishing writing the Final Project report
3.	Second semester of the 2023-2024 academic year (January 4 – February 2, 2024)	1. Revising the Final Project report based on the examiner's feedback 2. Submitting the Approved Final Project Report on January 16, 2024 3. Declared graduating in Graduation Assessment Meeting on February 2, 2024

In the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year, through dialogues with Gerrald and based on his previous success story in creating an instructional video when he did his Teaching Practice 2 course at an inclusive school, Gerrald was directed to start designing an instructional video for his final project. For this purpose, Gerrald interviewed an inclusive school homeroom teacher who had supervised him in the previous semester's Teaching Practice 2 course. From this interview, facilitated by his final project advisor, Gerrald determined the topic of his instructional video: *Setting: An Element of a Story.* The topic of the setting of a story was in the curriculum of the 8th-grade international class at the inclusive school. The journey of his product-based final project completion began with the procedure illustrated in Figure 1.

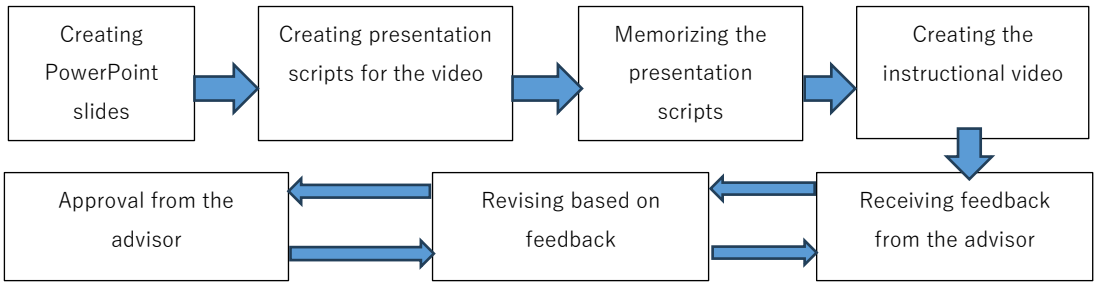

Figure 1. Gerrald's Steps for Designing an Instructional Video

Gerrald did seventeen consultation sessions with his advisor from February 15 until July 25, 2023, to do the illustrated procedure. First, Gerrald started by creating the PowerPoint slides to discuss. The first three meetings were thus allocated for the discussion of the scope of the topic and the presentation method. He revised his slides twice to cover the scope of the instructional video on *Setting: An Element of a Story*, which includes time and place while excluding atmosphere. In the next seven meetings, while still working on his slides, Gerrald was directed and supported to find suitable references for presenting the definition of Setting and to adopt a story for the practice of identifying Setting in it.

Once the PowerPoint slides were secured, Gerrald began writing the script for his instruction. In three weeks, Gerrald and his advisor spent time writing, audio-recording, revising, and re-recording the scripts for accuracy, fluency, intonation, and time coverage. Next, he unsurprisingly memorized the script in no time. The advisor praised him and proceeded to ask him to record the video. Then, Gerrald began to record the video twice. Despite the effort to revise and re-record, it became clear to the advisor that a professional studio would tackle this task better. However, it took two consultation meetings for Gerrald to buy this idea after the advisor asked him to compare his self-made video with several instructional videos chosen by the advisor from the YouTube channel. Also, the advisor convinced him that his main tasks were to make the slides and to memorize the scripts to be presented later, and he did both well. As predicted, in two weeks, Gerrald came back to the advisor, proudly showing his instructional video edited by the studio. It took one more editing of the video by the studio to revise the credit part before the advisor finally approved it. Thus, at the end of the semester, Gerrald completed the instructional video as required, ensuring it was adequately taken, edited, and equipped with credit at the end.

In the next semester, from July 31 to November 21, 2023, Gerrald continued working on his final project by writing it as required by the department's Manual for Final Projects. For 20 consultation meetings, he painstakingly rewrote his previous project report subchapter by subchapter to become his final project report and ensured that the minimum number of references was exceeded. Generally, the method to guide him was teaching, coaching, and giving consultation—a combination of showing the big picture and leading the small step-by-step. The 20 sessions of the consultation were regularly recorded in a consultation log. The consultation log was filled in English and Indonesian, Gerrald's first language, to facilitate understanding.

In the first meeting of the consultation sessions, the advisor invited Gerrald to go through the Final Project Manual and the grading rubric to make sure he understood the expectations of his final project report, such as how many chapters it should cover, what each chapter catered, the minimum word counts each chapter should have, how many references it required, and what kind of appendices it possibly included. It was agreed that both Gerrald and the advisor would work asynchronously via the Google Doc in a provided Google Drive folder and that onsite meetings, *WhatsApp* texts, and/or (video) calls would be used to facilitate the necessary back-and-forth communication.

After the big picture was shared, it was time to start the small steps. First, Gerrald was assigned to write the first chapter. He communicated with the advisor for the next three weeks to finish the task satisfactorily. Secondly, he was assigned to continue with the second chapter, the literature review. This time, Gerrald found difficulties in picking up references to support his final project report with a relevant theoretical framework. Even though the advisor had demonstrated step-by-step techniques to research Google Scholar using relevant keywords, he returned in two weeks with frustration and showed no results. Therefore, the advisor asked him to work on Chapter 3, which was the methodology of his product design. This chapter proved manageable for Gerrald, who finished it in a week. The fourth and the fifth chapters, however, were not as easy. The advisor needed to create a template for each chapter, complete with the subchapters and a description of what should be written in each subchapter. With this help, he completed the two chapters in five weeks.

Now that most chapters were adequately written, the advisor guided him to find at least ten references. Moreover, as required, along with this search, Gerrald was also instructed to use a reference manager–in this case, *Mendeley*. Therefore, in the next four weeks, he restudied and self-trained how to use *Mendeley* using two instructional videos from his previously taken academic writing course. Secondly, he also wrote Chapter 2 by paraphrasing the pertinent theories from the references approved. The final project advisor gave feedback on grammatical mistakes, and Gerrald made the revisions.

The final project report's appendices and layout were the last part deserving of attention. For four weeks and with more frequent consultation meetings, Gerrald did the following: Transcribing the interview, enlisting his interview questions, enclosing the screen-captures of his instructional video, preparing the necessary approval and cover pages, writing his foreword and others. The technical and technology-related work was particularly frustrating for him, so the advisor had to lead him step by step or refer him to another help provider when needed. Upon Gerrald's completing the final project report, the advisor–who always referred to the grading rubric to qualify the adequacy of his writing progress and result–rechecked the rubric one more time and found out that his work was qualified for the defense exam. And so, the journey was completed.

Strategies that can effectively facilitate a student with autism spectrum disorder to complete his product-based final project

This study also identified six strategies that effectively helped Gerrald complete his product-based final project. Those strategies were explained as follows. First, it was found that Gerrald would most likely succeed in doing one thing at a time. He would devote his time and energy to completing a task one step at a time or writing a chapter one section at a time. The procedure described in the previous section of this article in attending to the first research questions shared many illustrations in terms of this strategy of giving him one thing at a time to accomplish.

Secondly, the project had to focus on tasks within his control. Preparing for his video transcript, memorizing it, and performing it were within his control. Of the three aforementioned tasks, writing the transcript was the most difficult; memorizing it was the easiest, and performing it was the most enjoyable for him. Third, given the individual-differences factors of his own, he

would most likely respond successfully to oral explanations and oral and/or video tutorials. Being assigned to start writing a section by referring to a certain page or appointed pages in the department's manual would leave him unresponsive, coming back to the advisor with sadness on his face, reporting, and showing nothing. However, after some verbal explanation and several examples, his face would brighten, and he would nod several times, chuckling and shouting, "I see!" so loud he would be reminded to lower his voice.

Another effective technique or support was giving or directing him to a video tutorial since he could replay the video or part of the video as he wished until he grasped what he had to do, such as learning how to use *Mendeley* for his referencing because it was required. Gerrald also instinctively utilized this effective technique of repetition. Whenever he came for consultation, and as soon as he sat across the advisor's desk, he would record the whole meeting using his audio recording facility in his handphone. If the advisor requested him to pause it and start more essential discussions later, he would ignore her. If she pushed the pause button while grumbling about the nil possibility for him to re-listen to the long recording, he would get annoyed and push back the start button. Only later did the advisor realize this technique was his unique, effective tool to increase his sense of confidence and empowerment. The next strategy was having a consultation onsite. Gerrald despised having an online consultation using *Zoom* or *Google Meet,* a mode often preferred by his typically developing peers. He enjoyed onsite consultation much more.

Another support he needed was being there for him side-by-side in doing challenging tasks. In conducting the needs analysis interview, for example, he needed psychological support since communicating with people was in his courage zone. Therefore, the advisor went with him to meet the interviewee, stayed with him during the interview, reminded him to check his list of interview questions, asked some needed follow-up questions, and poured him with encouraging gestures like nodding and giving a thumb-up. Furthermore, writing coherent texts was frustrating for Gerrald. As a matter of fact, from his point of view, nothing was wrong with his writing. He needed to be guided by numerous questions one step at a time, for example, by asking him what the first thing he would do in teaching was, what came next, which came first: this step or that, and whether this was the cause or the result. Another complexity was finding references. Even though explanations and tutorials were repeatedly given, Gerrald missed the relevance of the reference for his work. However, he successfully and accurately used *Mendeley* to write the references for his final project after watching three step-by-step tutorial videos. Technically speaking, for creating a video, he was very confident in making it using the *Zoom* platform by experience. The result was underqualified, however. Therefore, his advisor suggested that he find help from a friend. This idea was not accepted. Only after she showed him some instructional videos on the YouTube channels to show the acceptable quality and directed him to find a studio to have his video made did he reluctantly agree.

Discussion

The dynamics of the student with ASD in completing his product-based final project

Before making a product in a product-based final project, students must do a needs analysis to ensure that the products they make align with the needs of certain parties, such as schools, tourism villages, and others. Typical developing students try to find the institutions independently and interview the relevant people. In comparison, in the case of Gerrald, instead of asking Gerrald to think of an institution that may need his product independently, the final paper advisor directly directed him to interview his former supervisor at the same inclusive school he went to for his Teaching Practice 2 course the semester before. Hence, Gerrald was already familiar with him. Given his ASD, interviewing people was not an easy task for Gerrald. However, interviewing someone familiar seemed to give him a certain degree of comfort zone he needed while still fulfilling the task of doing needs analysis. In this case, the advisor took advantage of an ASD characteristic of preferring familiarity (Wire, 2005). Previous studies have

suggested that those with ASD dislike changes and like to do things they are familiar with (Hume et al., 2014; Neuhaus et al., 2016). Besides, given that Gerrald was a highly motivated student who wanted to perform well academically, asking him to do things he thought he could do well might boost his motivation.

Next, Gerrald was asked to memorize his presentation script, and he succeeded. This finding was not surprising considering that ASD students, depending on the spectrum, may excel in rote memorization, where they repeat information over and over until it is committed to the memory (Yahya et al., 2013), especially in areas they want to master (Martínez & Carvajal, 2021). Some studies in a language learning context, albeit not extensive, also indicated that ASD students were better at such memorization than their typically developing peers (Subekti, 2020b; Ting, 2014). Furthermore, a positive learning experience, or mastery experience as Bandura (1997) called it, can boost students' self-efficacy. Hence, the advisor emphasized to Gerrald how he had done a great job thus far. Several studies involving ASD students at the primary level also reported that positive reinforcement led to task completion (Alsedrani, 2017) and enhanced confidence (Jabeen et al., 2021). The similarity of findings may suggest the relatively uniform effect of positive reinforcement on ASD students.

The tricky situation arose when the advisor finally realized that Gerrald could not make an instructional video of acceptable quality. By this point, he had already had the slides and memorized his script. However, his attempts at video recording and production were not satisfactory even after two tries. Two consultation meetings were needed to make Gerrald cease the idea of making the video himself and advise him to seek a professional studio to help record him and edit the video. It can be seen that once Gerrald believed he was capable of meeting the requirements, he enthusiastically carried out his tasks, even without realizing that others might view his work as underqualified. This finding was in line with several authors' reiteration of ASD students' inability to see the perspectives of others (Brown et al., 2014; Colle et al., 2008). When faced with similar situations, teachers must be careful not to make ASD students feel disheartened. For example, teachers have to let ASD students know that they can perform well in other relevant tasks. In the case of Gerrald, for example, the advisor convinced him that making the slides and the scripts and presenting the script was an achievement.

Furthermore, the advisor gave Gerrald the 'big picture' of the final report he needed to write after completing his instructional video to pass the Final Project course and graduate satisfactorily. Given Gerrald's desire to consistently perform well, this step was crucial in setting the tone and ensuring he diligently completed all the smaller tasks throughout the process. Martínez and Carvajal (2021) mentioned that ASD students often excel in things that interest them. In Gerrald's case, one of his aspirations was to "join the graduation ceremony." Hence, it is strategic for teachers in similar situations to facilitate ASD students to connect the expected behaviors with the things they like (Barletta, 2018).

While writing the final project report, Gerrald had the most difficulty writing up the literature review, necessitating him to review relevant theories and use citations. This finding was not surprising, as to write well, one should be able to have a sense of audience and convey logical thoughts (Brown & Klein, 2011), which are the areas that ASD students lack. Moreover, considering that writing belongs to the highest cognitive level of the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy—creating (Anderson et al., 2001)—and that Gerrald typically could only reach the third level, applying, unless he was intensively guided and facilitated, he would unlikely have been able to complete the task. Studies also have found that while ASD students could be facilitated to write, they needed more time, and the writing structures were not as complex as those written by their typically developing peers (Subekti, 2020a; Subekti & Lestariningsih, 2023).

Next, Gerrald's forte in doing clerical work was channeled when he made citations and references using *Mendeley*. He independently watched the tutorial videos and successfully

applied the knowledge with little help. This finding indicates that while, as a whole, Gerrald needed support to complete his Final Project course, in the process, he could do some things on his own, even using his strength as an ASD student.

Strategies that can effectively facilitate a student with autism spectrum disorder to complete his product-based final project

The present study found six strategies to help Gerrald complete his final project. The first was to allow him to do one thing at a time. This strategy was employed considering that, based on Gerrald's psychological examination in 2020, he could not be given a series of instructions at a time. Several studies involving ASD students, though not extensive, also found ASD students' inability to comprehend a series of commands at the same time (Grandin, 2007; Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). It should also be noted that the psychologist's assessment helped the advisor develop the strategy and succeeded, thus highlighting the importance of getting ASD detected and the symptoms identified by professionals to help them in their study best. Allowing an ASD student to do one thing at a time can also reduce cognitive overload, which can be triggered by too much input at a time. In other contexts, this strategy may work for many ASD students, which is also in line with the findings of several previous studies. However, teachers should ensure that the difficulty level of tasks given to students with ASD varies according to their position on the spectrum, with students at the higher end requiring simpler tasks.

The second strategy was to focus on tasks within his competence. As Gerrald was a highly motivated student despite the impairments associated with his ASD, it was essential to keep his self-efficacy or beliefs in his competence. Hence, the advisor needed to ensure that Gerrald always had a sense of achievement and self-efficacy to enable them to do the next tasks. Positive learning experiences have been generally acknowledged to increase confidence and sustain motivation (Ortega, 2009). In the case of Gerrald, this positive learning experience could even be more crucial. When things do not go the way they want, persons with ASD could exhibit anxiety (Koenig & Williams, 2017), which is not conducive to learning. Considering Gerrald's high motivation, this strategy may be effective for ASD students with similar motivation levels, as teachers should work to maintain a sense of achievement among these students.

The third was to make use of repetition techniques for his comprehension. Repetition helps in reinforcing learning and memory. Like typical ASD students who likely prefer structured and predictable patterns (Dockrell et al., 2014), Gerrald seemed to benefit from repetitions. Repetitions helped him internalize and apply new information, thus boosting his self-efficacy. This self-efficacy, in turn, could help increase motivation. This particular strategy may be implemented in facilitating the learning of many ASD students considering that many of these students face cognitive difficulties. Thus, they may benefit from repetitions of tasks.

Furthermore, the fourth and fifth strategies were to use oral feedback and tutorials instead of written ones and to do face-to-face consultations rather than online. There may not have been available studies specifically contrasting oral and written feedback on students with ASD. However, it is speculated that Gerrald's more favorable responses towards oral feedback may relate to his preference for face-to-face consultation rather than online. When doing face-to-face consultation, Gerrald could more freely ask questions when he did not understand without any barriers, such as misunderstandings and technological frustration. Besides, oral feedback generally enables immediate clarification and interaction, especially during one-on-one consultation sessions. These two strategies may also be effective for ASD students who are not tech-savvy. In such cases, technological tools can become a barrier to learning rather than a support, as ASD students are more prone to frustration when their expectations are not met due to challenges in executive functioning and emotional regulation.

The last strategy was to accompany him in doing challenging tasks. This strategy functioned as scaffolding, where teachers provide support during complex tasks (Celce-Murcia et al., 2013). Though not in the field of ASD, studies have found that students tended to be more

motivated and perform better when they felt teacher support (Huang & Wang, 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2023). Hence, the last strategy may not be ASD-specific. However, it should be noted that a certain task which may be deemed easy for typically developing students may be perceived as very challenging for ASD students. For example, the advisor accompanied Gerrald when he interviewed his former supervisor for the needs analysis as ASD students are generally lacking in social interactions. By providing targeted assistance during complex tasks, teachers can help ASD students build confidence and develop problem-solving skills, regardless of where they fall on the spectrum. This approach can be adapted to different levels of difficulty and individualized needs. It makes this particular strategy quite versatile for supporting ASD students across various settings.

All in all, the strategies were formulated by combining knowledge of ASD, Gerrald's psychological assessment results, and ongoing day-to-day reflections on what worked and what did not while assisting Gerrald. To effectively help students with ASD, multiple factors should be taken into account. These include paying attention to their cognitive and psychological aspects for learning success. The limitations of the study are mainly associated with the limited scope of this study. For example, this study focused on a single participant only, and the findings may not be generalized to other students with ASD, given the ASD heterogeneity. Furthermore, the day-to-day reflections on Gerrald's learning and helping strategies may be rather subjective, considering the absence of additional objective measures such as interviews or behavioral analysis tools.

Future studies can be suggested as follows. It is worthwhile to conduct similar studies in different contexts, such as different academic contexts and cultures. Involving ASD students with different levels of ASD could also contribute to the understanding of the extent to which some strategies work on different ASD students. Next, it is also important to investigate university teachers' awareness of teaching students with ASD, mainly due to the increasing prevalence of ASD students in postsecondary settings. An examination to see the availability of institutional policies and resources in helping ASD students across different universities in Indonesia can also be strategic.

CONCLUSION

The main findings of this study can be outlined as follows. Gerrald, an ASD student, successfully completed his final project after 37 consultation sessions with his advisor within a year. During the process, his advisor employed six main strategies. These were making him do one task at a time, letting him focus on tasks within his ability, making use of many repetitions to facilitate his understanding and self-efficacy, using oral feedback and face-to-face consultation sessions instead of online, and accompanying him in doing challenging tasks. The strategies were developed by integrating knowledge of ASD, Gerrald's psychological assessment, and daily reflections on what worked. To support students with ASD effectively, it is essential to consider their cognitive and psychological factors for successful learning.

Despite the limitations, this study contributes to understanding an ASD student's 'almost impossible' journey in completing his final project, necessitating him to conduct an interview, make a video, and write an academic report. Such a study is thus far under-represented in the ASD literature. Besides, this study offers feasible strategies that teachers and parents can adopt and provides an idea for tailoring support in response to students' strengths and weaknesses. Documenting Gerrald's experiences, this study also provides a nuanced understanding of how an ASD student responds to academic challenges. It also revealed the continuous interactions between the ASD student's personality, his psychological needs and external support from the advisor. Hence, it adds to the understanding on how an ASD student navigated tasks and interact with his environment. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of the strategies found in the present study in diverse educational contexts and with a broader range of students with ASD. Additionally, research could examine how different levels of support like peer mentorship and

technological tools influence the completion of product-based final projects across various disciplines. Longitudinal studies could also provide insight into the long-term impact of these strategies on academic outcomes for students with ASD.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
Participation in this study was voluntary, and all participants were fully informed before agreeing to take part. They were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and any possible risks and benefits related to their participation. The participants were also informed that their identities would remain confidential and that the information they shared would be used only for research purposes. In addition, they were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any penalty or losing any entitled benefits. Their continued participation indicated their informed consent under these stated conditions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data used in this study are not publicly accessible because the researchers are committed to protecting participant privacy and maintaining confidentiality in line with ethical research standards and data protection requirements. Nevertheless, access to the dataset may be considered for researchers or other interested parties who need the data for verification or further analysis. Any such request will be reviewed individually and must be justified appropriately. Data sharing can only take place after approval has been granted by the relevant institutional ethics review board, ensuring that the intended use of the data remains consistent with ethical principles and the terms of participant consent.

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