

## Video: Why Neurodiversity & TEFL? - Transcript

**0:24:** This course is based on the notion of neurodiversity and takes a holistic look at teaching English as a foreign language through the lens of neurodiversity.

Why do we draw on the notion of neurodiversity here?

**0:42:** First of all, a quick revision: What is neurodiversity? There are many different definitions, but they all have one thing in common: They acknowledge that people differ in how they think, and that as a consequence, some people find it easier to navigate society and daily life than other people. That is not because some ways of cognitive functioning are better than others - but because our world - in the sense of a majority world - is built in a way that makes it easy for some people, and harder for other people, to do what they want to do. You might have encountered this idea before - it is often called “the social model of disability”.

**1:35:** Furthermore, neurodiversity assumes that the fact that your brain works this way or that way, doesn't impact your value as a human being, or your right to fully and equally participate in society. Therefore, neurodiversity does not just imply that we should value the heterogeneity in ways brains work and people interact with their environment, but also that we should celebrate these differences and contribute to creating the kind of world in which everybody can live in a way that works for them and for their brain.

**2:17:** By the way: Some authors use the term “neurodivergent” to describe people who differ from the majority in how their brain works and how they interact with their environment. Instead of saying that somebody is neurodivergent, you could also say that they belong to a minority neurotype.

**2:42:** So, why is neurodiversity important for TEFL?

In this video, we will address three aspects.

First: It is important to know about the needs of neurodivergent learners, so you can create lessons that work for all learners in your classroom. As an added bonus, many of the things you can do to enable learning for neurodivergent learners can help all the learners in your classroom.

Second: One of the goals of the EFL classroom is to prepare learners to communicate with a wide range of people. In order to do so, we need to think about what goes into successful communication and how this relates to learners with different neurotypes.

And thirdly, we will talk about diversification in representation: Does the EFL classroom reflect the heterogeneity of society? The texts you read, the videos you watch, the pictures you see - do they reflect the true diversity of society, including on dimensions related to neurodiversity? And: Why is it important that the classroom does reflect this diversity?

**4:20:** Let's talk about the first aspect: The importance of learning more about the needs of neurodivergent learners, and how to create lessons and learning environments that work for everybody in your classroom.

One thing is clear: While we all have some things in common when learning a language, we also differ from one another in some other ways. For example, input is always important for learning a new language. But, depending on what level you are at, some types of input might be too simple for you, or too hard - at least without additional scaffolding. Therefore, learner orientation has long played an important role in the

EFL classroom. Andreas Bonnet, Professor of TEFL didactics, defines learner orientation as follows “Learner orientation in FLT [that is, foreign language teaching] means, making language teaching adaptive to the learners by taking into account their individual psychological dispositions (...) as well as their individual constructions of identity (...) in order to foster learner autonomy with respect to its functional (...) and critical (...) aspect.”

**5:51:** Another aspect of learner orientation considers individual differences in attention and working memory, which researchers like Judit Kormos and Zhisheng Wen have found are important to understanding why some learners acquire new language more easily or rapidly than others.

Many EFL teachers want or need to go beyond learner orientation, adopting an explicitly inclusive perspective on teaching and learning. "Inclusive pedagogy focuses on the creation of learning environments that - through e.g. diversified materials - provide ideal approaches to learning for all.

**6:39:** Whether your goal is learner orientation or inclusive education, in both cases it will be helpful to understand the needs of your learners. When you learn more about the needs of neurodivergent learners and how to support them in your lessons, you develop your personal teaching toolkit that will serve you in many EFL teaching contexts. In other words: By engaging with the topic of neurodiversity, you can learn things that will help you to teach in a way that works for everybody in your classroom.

**7:20:** Now, let's talk about the second aspect. One of the goals of the EFL classroom is to develop communicative competence. Communicative competence - a notion originally developed by the linguist Dell Hymes - is the ability “to use the language for meaningful communication” (Richards 2006, 3). A person who has communicative competence can “use language for a range of different purposes and functions”, can vary their “use of language according to the setting and the participants”, and knows “how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge”. Importantly, communicative competence is not just about speaking and listening - it can involve all modalities, and includes the ability to “produce and understand different types of texts”.

**8:24:** One key aspect here is that communicative competence includes the ability to adapt the way we speak, depending on our interlocutors and the setting. Richards (2006) gives examples: When to use informal and when to use formal speech, or being aware of the differences between spoken and written language. But it is worth digging deeper here, and to look at more ways in which we need to adapt the way we communicate - as speakers and writers, as listeners and readers - based on our interlocutors, that is the people we are communicating with.

This is where communicative competence connects with intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

**9:21:** You might already be familiar with the concept of ICC. In case you haven't encountered it before: The basic idea underlying ICC is that communicative competence itself is not enough if your goal is to communicate effectively with people across different languages and/or different countries. Michael Byram, for example, suggests that an intercultural speaker needs certain attitudes and knowledge, but also skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

**10:10:** So, to summarize: One of the goals of the EFL classroom is the development of communicative competence, that is the ability “to use the language for meaningful communication”. This involves adapting the way we speak and write based on setting and interlocutor and also taking differences between people and settings into consideration while listening and reading. We use the term “intercultural communicative competence” to stress differences connected to culture and language.

**10:54:** But: What does this have to do with neurodiversity?

When you learn more about different neurotypes, you will sometimes encounter descriptions of communication challenges related to specific neurotypes. Usually, these are framed as communicative deficits. Damian Milton, an autistic philosopher, has criticized this understanding. To counter this understanding, he has introduced the notion of the “double empathy problem”.

**11:33:** When people with different communicative styles communicate, this can be challenging. But, the challenge is not just due to one party in that communication. It is about differences between the parties. The neurodivergent person’s way of communicating may challenge the neurotypical person’s habits of communication - and the other way around.

If we view communication challenges from this perspective, we arrive at something very close to the notion of intercultural communicative competence. It’s not just about everybody learning to communicate in one specific way - but about knowing different ways to communicate, adapting to the person you are communicating with, and the setting you are communicating in at a specific point in time.

**12:32:** This can, of course, also include changing the setting to fit your needs or the needs of your interlocutor, or the ability to request such changes from others.

So, neurodiversity can be an important concept to take into account when looking at what “communicative competence” really means - both for neurotypical and neurodivergent communicators.

**13:06:** Finally, let’s talk about the third aspect: Representation. Imagine, for a moment, that you are a student who identifies as male. You open your textbook, and on every page, there are pictures of people. To be more precise, pictures of women in different everyday situations and professions: A group of girls queuing for ice cream, a surgeon, a firefighter, a homemaker. Pictures of women competing at the Olympics and Paralympics. Young women, old women; trans women, cis women; famous women, ordinary women - but only women, in each and every picture. All the stories, too, are about women. Female heroes, female explorers, female teachers, female criminals, and female detectives chasing them.

**14:26:** Maybe there is one chapter in which you find pictures of boys and men, and pictures of nonbinary children, teens, and adults. It’s a chapter that discusses the challenges of people who aren’t women. But this is the only chapter in which they are visible in any meaningful way.

Again, for this thought experiment, assume that you are a student identifying as male. Would this impact your English language learning experience in any way?

**15:02:** Now, switch your perspective for a second. Imagine you are a learner identifying as female. Would this have any impact on you, positive or negative?

Now imagine that you are a neurodivergent learner. Not only do you not encounter any texts about you, or images of you in your textbooks. When there is a discussion about you, it is because you need some things to be different than they are for everybody else.

**15:42:** When we are talking about neurodiversity and EFL learning, we can also make neurodiversity visible, by including it as a topic of the EFL classroom. Do learners read texts written by neurodivergent authors? Do they encounter a broad range of characters from different neurotypes?

**16:06:** To summarize: In this video, we discussed why neurodiversity is an important topic for the EFL classroom. We touched on three reasons: Learning about neurodiversity and from neurodivergent people can help us in creating lessons that support all learners. Learning about neurodiversity helps us in thinking about the goals of the EFL classroom, specifically communicative competence. And, last but not least,

learning about neurodiversity can help us in thinking about neurodiversity as a topic in the EFL classroom, and about representation of neurodivergent people and neurodivergent cultures in the EFL classroom.