



Profiling Communication Difficulties in Autistic children in primary and secondary school in Makurdi Municipal

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Abstract

This study explored the communication difficulties faced by autistic children and how these challenges impede their socialization and interactions with peers. While the significance of these challenges is recognized, many existing interventions adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to address the unique communication profiles of each child. Consequently, there is an urgent need for targeted research to better understand the specific communication barriers encountered by autistic children and to assess the effectiveness of various therapeutic interventions. The research aims to bridge this critical gap in the literature by providing insights that could lead to more effective communication strategies and support mechanisms tailored to the individual needs of autistic children. Utilizing a qualitative research design, we gathered data through interviews, observations, and recorded conversations with subjects from schools in the Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State, focusing on learners diagnosed with autism. The study is framed by two theoretical perspectives: Noam Chomsky's theory of language development and the theory of pragmatic language impairment, as articulated through the speech acts of Austin and Searle. Findings reveal that autistic children exhibit a range of language abilities, underscoring the importance of recognizing each child's individuality for effective communication. This research aims to enhance our understanding of language development in autistic children, ultimately fostering improved communication practices that accommodate their unique needs.

Keywords: Profiling, Autism, communication difficulties, intervention

Introduction

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, serving as the primary means through which individuals express their thoughts, needs, and emotions. For children on the autism spectrum, however, communication can be a complex and challenging endeavor. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by a range of developmental differences, with communication difficulties being one of its most prominent features. These challenges may manifest as limited verbal abilities, difficulties in understanding and using language, and issues with interpreting non-verbal communication cues such as gestures and facial expression.

Research indicates that approximately 1 in 44 children are diagnosed with ASD, with communication disorders affecting up to 50% of these children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Children with ASD typically exhibit a series of communication challenges, dictated by the severity of their condition, cognitive abilities, and social development. While not every child with ASD has language impairment, their ability to communicate can vary significantly across the spectrum.

The impact of these communication difficulties extends beyond the individual child, significantly affecting family dynamics, educational attainment, and social relationships. For instance, children with limited communication skills often struggle in classroom settings, making it difficult to engage with peers and teachers. This struggle can lead to increased anxiety and reduced academic performance. Furthermore, ineffective communication can impede their ability to forge meaningful relationships, contributing to feelings of loneliness and exclusion.

This study examines how autistic children acquire language skills—a central focus in linguistics, particularly within psycholinguistics and developmental linguistics. Understanding how these children learn to communicate can provide valuable insights into the broader nature of language acquisition and the unique ways language is used and understood by individuals on the spectrum.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognition of these challenges, existing interventions often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, overlooking the unique communication profiles of each child. There is a pressing need for targeted research to better understand the specific barriers autistic children face in communication and the efficacy of various therapeutic interventions. By investigating these dimensions, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature, providing insights that could inform the development of more effective communication strategies and support mechanisms tailored to meet the needs of autistic children.

Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to explore the communication difficulties faced by autistic children and evaluate the effectiveness of existing therapeutic interventions. The study seeks to provide insights that can inform the development of targeted communication strategies to enhance social integration and improve the quality of life for these children.

Objectives:

1. Identify Communication Challenges autistic children face in both verbal and non-verbal contexts.
2. Examine how autistic children interact and communicate within their social circles.
3. Explore patterns of communication between autistic children and their siblings or adults.

By achieving these objectives, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of communication difficulties in autistic children and support the development for more effective and individualized intervention strategies.

Research Questions

- i. What specific communication challenges do autistic children face in both verbal and non-verbal contexts?
- ii. How do autistic children interact and communicate within social circles?
- iii. What are the patterns of communication between autistic children and their siblings or adults?

Literature Review

Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a complex neurological condition that significantly impacts communication, socialization, and interpersonal interactions. Typically diagnosed in early childhood—often before age three—autism can persist throughout an individual's life. Emenanjo (2012) defines autism as “a complex developmental disability that impairs neurological, intellectual, and socio-emotional abilities of the affected child, with onset before age three” (Ugechi, 2013). Individuals with autism may face challenges in social skills, exhibit repetitive behaviors, display sensory sensitivities, and possess a unique perspective of the world. Importantly, autism is a spectrum disorder, affecting individuals in various ways and to differing degrees, ranging from mild to severe.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), ASD is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, along with restricted and repetitive behaviors. Diagnosis occurs when a child or adult exhibits abnormalities in a ‘triad’ of behavioral domains: social development, communication, and restricted behaviors or obsessive interests (APA, 1994; ICD-10, 1994). Notably, autism can occur across the entire IQ spectrum, with intelligence quotient being a strong predictor of long-term outcomes (Rutter, 1978). Language delay is a prevalent feature of autism; many affected individuals do not utter single words by age two. Asperger Syndrome (AS), a subgroup within the spectrum, shares features with autism but typically lacks a history of language delay and often involves average or above-average IQ levels (Asperger, 1944).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.) outlines key features of autism, including:

- Impairment in Social Interaction: Difficulties with nonverbal behavior, lack of sharing, and challenges in developing peer relationships.

- Impairment in Communication: Delays in spoken language, challenges in conversation, and repetitive language use.
- Restricted and Repetitive Behaviors: Preoccupations with specific interests, rigid routines, and repetitive movements (Wetherby & Prizant, 2000).

In Nigeria, recent studies indicate a significant increase in the prevalence of ASD. As of 2023, an estimated 600,000 children are affected, with prevalence rates showing 1 in 43.5 in South-West Nigeria and 1 in 125 in South-Eastern Nigeria (Omigbodun et al., 2023). These findings underscore the urgent need for heightened awareness and early intervention strategies. Recent research also emphasizes the importance of parent-mediated behavioral interventions to address behavioral challenges in children with ASD, advocating for community engagement and support systems to facilitate early diagnosis and treatment (Nwokolo et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. Such research aims to describe existing phenomena both natural and human-engineered by focusing on characteristics, qualities, and the interrelationships between activities. The researcher utilized a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze data, aiming to understand the communication difficulties faced by autistic children through systematic observation and documentation.

The subjects of this research comprised 12 autistic primary and secondary school children in Makurdi municipal selected to provide insights into their communication challenges. Data collection was conducted using a checklist designed by the researcher, which facilitated structured observations and ensured comprehensive coverage of the relevant communication domains.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two main theoretical frameworks: Noam Chomsky's theory of language development and Speech Act Theory as proposed by J.L. Austin and John Searle. Chomsky's work laid the foundation for understanding the structure and acquisition of language, positing that the human brain is inherently equipped to learn language. He argued that the rules governing language acquisition are inborn and develop over time (Chomsky, 1965). In contrast, Jean Piaget (1970) maintained that cognitive development must precede language acquisition.

Speech Act Theory focuses on the intent behind communication, asserting that language serves not only to convey information but also to perform actions. For example, a child with pragmatic language impairments might misinterpret the phrase "Can you pass the salt?" as merely a question about ability, rather than recognizing it as a polite request. This misunderstanding can complicate social interactions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

By integrating Chomsky's insights into language structure with concepts from Speech Act Theory, this study aims to explore the communication challenges faced by autistic children, particularly with regard to language learning and social interactions.

Presentation and Data Analysis

The researcher collected data from autistic learners at Beautiful Minds Schools, Source of Wisdom School (SOWS), and Hearts and Minds School (H&M), all located in Makurdi

Municipal. A total of twelve subjects with autism were observed for data collection, with ages ranging from four to eighteen years. At the time of data collection, all but one participant were in school, consisting of eleven males and one female. This demographic profile indicates that 91.7% of the subjects are male, while 8.3% are female. The autistic children exhibited varying language abilities based on the severity of their individual conditions, categorized as mild, severe, and profound. Autism, recognized as a spectrum disorder, displays a wide variation in symptom types and severity, affecting individuals of all genders, races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds.

Discussion of Pupils' Profiles

1. **Subject One:** A 15-year-old verbal autistic male. He is the eldest child with three younger siblings and is enrolled in a Special Educational Needs (S.E.N) Unit. He tends to echo words spoken to him before responding and enjoys counting numbers. Although he writes well, he drifts off to scribbling when not guided. He dislikes closed doors and is insensitive to loud noises but can become agitated and throw tantrums during communication breakdowns, leading to meltdowns.

2. **Subject Two:** An 8-year-old non-verbal autistic male. He produces sounds but does not articulate words. Instead, he uses non-verbal cues, such as pointing or dragging someone to indicate his needs. He is the first child with two younger siblings, loves coloring, and is progressing to painting. However, he is hyperactive, struggles with social interactions, and is very sensitive to loud noises. During meltdowns, he may resort to self-harm.

3. **Subject Three:** A 4-year-old non-verbal autistic male. He is in a S.E.N Unit and prefers solitary play, does not maintain eye contact, and does not respond to his name. He is sensitive to loud noises but does not exhibit tantrums; instead, he cries loudly to draw attention when he needs something. He is the only child in his family.

4. **Subject Four:** A 14-year-old non-verbal autistic female. As the youngest of four siblings, she does not maintain eye contact and rarely attempts to communicate her needs. She often plays alone, primarily with her fingers, and is very sensitive to loud noises. Meltdowns occur when she cannot express her needs. She attends a special needs center.

5. **Subject Five:** A 4-year-old non-verbal autistic male. He is the youngest of four siblings and attends nursery 2. He does not interact with others and seems absorbed in his own world. He makes unusual sounds to communicate his needs and occasionally points or drags someone to indicate what he wants. He experiences meltdowns when unable to communicate his needs or when denied his desires.

6. **Subject Six:** A 6-year-old verbal autistic male in nursery 3. He speaks fluently, having developed language at age 5. He restricts himself to a diet of pap and refuses solid foods. He exhibits unusual movements, prefers to have his way, and throws tantrums when denied. He does not engage with peers and interprets language literally, often missing sarcasm.

7. **Subject Seven:** A 4-year-old non-verbal autistic male in nursery 2. He can identify letters and numbers by touch but cannot articulate them. He is hyperactive, lacks eye contact, and prefers solitary play. He communicates his needs by pointing or dragging someone to an object. He does not initiate conversations or understand facial expressions, and he experiences meltdowns when unable to communicate effectively.

8. **Subject Eight:** A 10-year-old male with echolalia, currently in primary 4. He uses one-word responses and often echoes words spoken to him. While he responds to some instructions, he typically does not maintain eye contact during interactions. He displays a short attention span and uses body movements to signal his needs. Tantrums occur when he cannot communicate effectively or when he does not get his way.

9. **Subject Nine:** An 8-year-old verbal autistic male, the first child of his parents. He is in primary 3 and often echoes phrases before providing proper responses, such as “fine” when asked, “How are you?” He is sensitive to loud sounds and interacts with peers during gatherings, although he avoids deep conversations. He can read and write, demonstrating some verbal skills.

10. **Subject Ten:** A 6-year-old non-verbal autistic male and the only child in his family. He is in nursery 3 and does not respond to verbal prompts or produce meaningful sounds. He relies on non-verbal cues to communicate his needs and becomes frustrated when unable to express himself, leading to meltdowns. He often isolates himself and makes unusual sounds for self-stimulation.

11. **Subject Eleven:** A 7-year-old non-verbal autistic male, the first child of his parents, currently in primary one. He does not respond to verbal cues or indicate his needs through gestures. He prefers solitude and displays tantrums when feeling overwhelmed.

12. **Subject Twelve:** An 18-year-old verbal autistic male who is currently out of school. His parents withdrew him due to concerns that his teachers were not adequately addressing his needs. He communicates using monosyllabic words and phrases, often employing pronouns inappropriately (e.g., saying “er un tea” in Tiv, meaning “make tea for him”). He seeks to have his way and may experience meltdowns when denied. Although he does not initiate conversations or maintain eye contact, he feels more comfortable with familiar faces and enjoys singing or humming songs.

Analysis of Communication Difficulties in Autistic Children

The study addresses three primary research questions:

1. What specific communication challenges do autistic children face in both verbal and non-verbal contexts?
2. How do autistic children interact and communicate within social circles?
3. What are the patterns of communication between autistic children and their siblings/adults?

Findings and Discussion

1. Communication Challenges:

The profiles of the twelve autistic children reveal a spectrum of communication difficulties, both verbal and non-verbal. The subjects exhibited varying degrees of language capabilities, from non-verbal to verbal (with echolalia). For instance, Subject Two and Subject Five, who are non-verbal, demonstrate reliance on non-verbal cues such as pointing to communicate their needs. This aligns with the findings of Emenanjo (2012), which highlight that communication impairments are central to autism. Subjects who are verbal, such as Subject Nine, echo phrases, indicating a delay in spontaneous language production and the challenges of pragmatic

language use. These patterns underscore that language delay and difficulties in both understanding and articulating needs are prevalent among autistic children, reflecting the spectrum nature of the disorder.

2. Social Interactions:

The study illustrates that social interactions among autistic children are often fraught with challenges. Subjects like Subject Seven and Subject Ten, who do not maintain eye contact or initiate conversations highlight the difficulties faced in peer engagement. This is consistent with the American Psychiatric Association's characterization of ASD, which stipulates persistent deficits in social communication. Interactions in social circles often lead to misunderstandings, which can trigger meltdowns (as observed in several subjects) when communication fails. The lack of effective communication strategies further exacerbates feelings of isolation and can lead to self-harm, particularly in children who are non-verbal (Subject two).

3. Patterns of Communication with Siblings/Adults:

The data indicates that communication between autistic children and their siblings or adults is influenced by the child's communication style. Subjects such as Subject One, who uses echolalia, may require additional support from caregivers for effective communication. Conversely, non-verbal children like Subject Four rely heavily on caregivers to interpret their needs through behavior rather than language. This suggests that family dynamics also play a crucial role in supporting communication development, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that involve siblings and other family members.

The analysis is further enriched by the application of Noam Chomsky's theory of language development and Speech Act Theory. Chomsky's perspective posits that the ability to acquire language is inherent and structured, which resonates with the varying degrees of language development seen among the subjects. For instance, while some children demonstrate advanced language use (Subject One), others struggle with even basic communicative cues (Subject Three). This variability reflects the complexity of language acquisition as proposed by Chomsky.

On the other hand, Speech Act Theory elucidates the pragmatic challenges faced by these children. Many subjects struggle to understand the intent behind language, which is crucial for effective communication in social interactions. For example, Subject Eight's use of echolalia suggests a reliance on mimicking rather than understanding conversational norms and intentions. This disconnect can lead to misinterpretations and difficulties in social exchanges, as seen in many profiles.

Implications for Intervention

The findings of this study highlight the necessity for individualized communication interventions that consider the unique profiles of each child. The spectrum of communication challenges calls for tailored strategies that address the specific needs of verbal and non-verbal children alike. For instance, the incorporation of visual aids, social stories, and parent-mediated interventions could enhance communication effectiveness. Furthermore, fostering environments that facilitate social interactions among peers may help mitigate feelings of isolation and promote better understanding.

In conclusion, the research underscores the complexities of communication difficulties in autistic children and the critical role of supportive interventions. By leveraging theoretical frameworks that highlight the intricacies of language development and communication intent, practitioners and caregivers can develop more effective strategies to support these children in their communication journeys.

Recommendations

1. **Individualized Intervention Strategies:** It is crucial to develop individualized communication strategies tailored to each child's unique profile. Interventions should consider the severity of autism and the specific communication challenges faced by the child, utilizing techniques such as visual aids, social stories, and play-based learning to enhance understanding and expression.

2. **Parent and Caregiver Training:** Educating parents and caregivers on effective communication methods is imperative. Workshops and training programs can equip them with skills to support their children's communication needs, such as using clear language, visual supports, and encouraging alternative communication methods like sign language or augmentative communication devices.

3. **Peer Interaction Programs:** Establishing structured peer interaction programs in educational settings can help autistic children develop social communication skills. Activities that promote socialization in small groups can provide safe environments for practice, reducing anxiety and building confidence in social settings.

4. **Community Awareness and Support Initiatives:** Increasing community awareness about autism and its communication challenges can foster a more inclusive environment for autistic individuals. Support groups and community engagement initiatives can facilitate understanding and acceptance, aiding in the integration of autistic children into various social contexts.

5. **Multidisciplinary Collaboration:** Encouraging collaboration among professionals—including speech therapists, psychologists, educators, and occupational therapists—can provide comprehensive support for autistic children. This team approach allows for a holistic understanding of each child's needs and the development of coordinated intervention plans.

6. **Regular Assessment and Progress Monitoring:** Implementing regular assessments to track communication progress can help in adjusting strategies as needed. Monitoring speech and language development will enable caregivers and educators to identify areas needing additional support or intervention.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant communication difficulties faced by autistic children and the diverse patterns of interaction that characterize their experiences. By examining the profiles of twelve autistic children, it is evident that communication challenges are multifaceted, varying widely among individuals. The integration of Noam Chomsky's theory of language development and Speech Act Theory has provided valuable insights into the complexities of language acquisition and social communication for these children.

The findings emphasize the urgent need for tailored intervention strategies that address the unique communication profiles of autistic individuals. By fostering an environment of understanding and support through individualized approaches, community awareness, and

collaborative efforts among professionals and families, we can enhance the quality of life for autistic children and empower them to navigate social interactions more effectively.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of recognizing communication as a fundamental aspect of human experience. By prioritizing the communication needs of autistic children, we can contribute to their social inclusion and overall well-being, ensuring that they are supported in expressing their thoughts, needs, and emotions throughout their lives.

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