



The Development of Expressive Language of Autism Spectrum Disorder Students from Their Teachers' Perspective¹

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Abstract

Improving communication specially through expressive language is the main goal that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) need to acquire. Students with ASD can face difficulties when communicating with others because they have poor expressive language. They could not even form a full sentence without being trained. This study aimed to investigate the development of expressive language of ASD students from their teachers' perspective. The researcher used mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative). The tools were a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The participants in this research were 30 male and female teachers from Yanbu and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The results showed that the expressive language of ASD students was very poor before joining speech therapy sessions. Using methods like group playing and modelling had a positive effect on developing ASD student's expressive language.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, Expressive Language

1. Introduction

Students with Autism spectrum disorder face many issues during their learning journey. This can start from their family's feelings of shames or unacceptance of having an ASD child. Another issue is that ASD students get distracted easily and they cannot focus for a long time. ASD students face difficulties in expressing their feelings or needs and their teachers struggle with them when they teach them language especially expressive language in (Hojjati and Khalilkhaneh, 2014). I have chosen this topic because one of my family member is specialized in teaching ASD students and he usually struggles with these students to develop their expressive language. As an Applied Linguistic Student, this issue dragged my attention and made me wonder how to help ASD students to express their feelings, communicate, and

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participate in school and society easily and with no issues. This led me to explore the topic of the development of expressive language of ASD students from their teachers' perspectives.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Students with ASD is considered as a new topic here in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi ministry of education tries its best to prepare the suitable environment for ASD students to ensure they receive proper education in appropriate learning environment. Autism spectrum disorder students suffer from lack of expressing their feelings and needs given that ASD students were not equal to normal students in acquiring and learning the language. They needed a qualified teachers or speech therapist to teach them the language especially expressive language, so they could improve their ability to share feelings, needs and thoughts. Teachers struggled with ASD students when teaching them how to develop expressive language and this means that teachers and speech therapists need to use more methods and strategies to achieve a good result (Alnemary, 2017). Some ASD students' families do not have enough knowledge of this disorder while others feel a shamed and do not accept having an ASD child. Therefore, this study investigates ASD student's development of expressive language from their teacher's perspectives.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to explore the development of the expressive language of students with ASD from their teachers' perspective. This study aimed to explore teachers' point of view, if encouragement and motivation can affect the development of ASD students' expressive language.

1.3. Research Questions

The researcher attempted to answer one research question.

- How does expressive language of ASD students develop from their teachers' perspective?

2. Literature Review

In this section the researcher provides a definitions of key concepts and a summary of five previous studies. Then, the researcher mentions the gap between the present study and the previous ones.

2.1. Definitions of Key Concepts

2.1.1. Expressive Language

Expressive language is our ability to communicate our thoughts and feelings through words, gestures, signs, and/or symbols. It can be as simple as pointing to a desired object or as complex as writing a book about an area of interest (Wallace, 2023).

2.1.2. Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by primary impairments in social interactions, communication, and repetitive and stereotyped behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by persistent impairment of social communication and reciprocity across multiple contexts as well as restricted, repetitive, and stereotypical patterns of behaviour, interests, and or activities (Zaky, 2017).

2.2. Previous Studies in the Literature

Arutiunian et al. (2021) conducted a study on Russian primary school aged children who suffer from autism spectrum disorder in Russia. The author focused on direct comparison between expressive and receptive language. The participants were 82 children; their ages were between 7-11 years old. The test was made in Russian language and it included three assessments: vocabulary, morphosyntax, and discourse. The researcher found that there is a clear difference between expressive and receptive patterns depending on the linguistic level, children non-verbal IQ, and assessment tools.

Lane et al. (2016) conducted a study to examine promoting expressive language in young children with or at-risk of autism spectrum disorder in a preschool classroom in USA. The study was quantitative. The researchers used a multiple probe design to investigate the impact of a classroom-based Naturalistic Language Intervention (NLI) "a strategy included into participants' routine or activity to encourage the targeted behaviour naturally "on expressive language. They aimed to measure the accurate results from ASD child's in pre-intervention stage. The four participants in this study were a preschool children demonstrating characteristics of ASD their ages between (49-61 month old) three of them had a Significant Developmental Delay (SDD) while one was ASD. The findings, showed that intervention had a positive effect in the use of language targets and there were changes in commenting, requesting and phrase complexity for some children, but for one child there was changes in his behaviour and modifications were requaierd.

Luyster et al. (2008) provided a study about language assessment and development in toddlers with autism spectrum disorder in USA. The study was mixed method using direct assessment, parent questionnaire and parent interview. The participants were 164 toddlers between the age of 18 to 33 months (129 boys and 35 girls). The study aimed to investigate the consistency of three standardized measures used to evaluate language and communication in toddlers with ASD. Results suggested good agreement among different measures of early language including direct assessment and parent report measures particularly expressive language.

A study was conducted by Soni (2023) about instructive method and expressive language skills of ASD children in Mumbai. The study was quantitative using a pre-test and post-test as a tool to investigate the impact of the multimedia aided instructive method to develop the expressive language skills of children with ASD and to improve their academic development. The sample consisted of 30 students (18 boys and 12 girls), their ages were between 5 to 14 years old. The results showed that there was a positive effect of multimedia instruction on expressive language skill and there was no significant difference in expressive language skills of female subjects and male ASD children.

A study was conducted by Cadigan et al. (2007) about measuring expressive language growth in young children with autism spectrum disorders. The study investigated the use of picture naming growth and development. The participants in this study were 11 pre-schoolers children who had autism spectrum disorder, their ages were between 39-69 months old. The results indicated that picture naming was effective, valid and reliable measure of language skills for young children with ASD.

This study differs from previous studies in terms of target participants, setting and method. The participant in the present study were teachers from Saudi Arabia (12male and 18 female) while previous studies targets children's of ASD. The previous studies used tools like pre-test and post-test, interview, etc. This research is mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) using semi structured interview and scale Likert questionnaire based on multiple choice questions.

3. Methodology

This section presents the type of research, research tool, participants and data collection procedure.

3.1. Type of the Research

The researcher used a mix method to provide good outcome using a questionnaire and interview as tools for data collection.

3.2. Research Tools

3.2.1. Questionnaire

The data was collected by using multiple choice questions questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions which can be answered by choosing either (yes, no, and to some extent). The questionnaire was sent through WhatsApp to the participants refer to the questionnaire in the appendix.

3.2.2. Interviews

The researcher chose a semi structured interview as a tool. A semi structured interview is a qualitative research method that involves oral communication with individuals in a way that is self conscious and based on a partially structured methodological course (Longhurst, 2012, p.113). A semi- structured interview is a data collection procedure method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework. However, the questions are not set in order or in phrasing (Goerge, 2023). The questions were sent to the interviewees. Then, they recorded their answers.

The interview included 6 pre-prepared questions asking about ASD students' expressive language. The interview questions were written in Arabic and then translated into English.

3.3. Participants of the Research

The participants of this research were teachers of ASD students in Saudi Arabia. First, the participants of the questionnaire were 30 (12 males and 18 female) Saudi teachers. Their ages range between 29- 40 years old from Jeddah and Yanbu. They were teachers in schools and specialized centres. Second, the participants of the semi structured interview were 6 male teachers worked in Royal commission schools and one teacher was from Jeddah.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

First, the researcher took the ethical approval from all the participants. Second, the researcher prepared the questionnaire questions to send them to the 30 participants by WhatsApp. The questionnaire consisted of 10 multiple choice questions. It took two days from the participants to answer the questionnaire. The researcher did the interview with 7 participants. The interview was a semi structured interview consisting of 6 prepared questions. The questions were sent to 7 participants and they took one and half day to send their recordings to the researcher by whatsapp. Then, the researchers took those recordings and transcribed them and then translate them from Arabic to English. Finally, the result was analyzed in two ways: quantitative data were analyzed using table of numbers and qualitative data were analyzed statistically.

4. Results and Discussion

This section of the research presents the questionnaire and interview results. In addition, it discusses the result to answer the research question: How does expressive language of ASD students develop from their teacher's perspective?

4.1. Questionnaire Results

The first data collection tool was the questionnaire to investigate the development of expressive language of ASD students from their teacher's perspective. Table 1 demonstrates teacher's responses to the MCQ questionnaire which consists of 10 (yes, no, to some extent) questions.

Table 1 Response frequencies of questionnaire items

Questions	Yes	No	To some extent
Questions 1	30	0	0
Questions 2	30	0	0
Questions 3	29	1	0
Questions 4	27	3	0
Questions 5	23	7	0
Questions 6	22	8	0
Questions 7	20	0	10
Questions 8	18	12	0
Questions 9	4	2	24
Questions 10	8	22	0

Table 1 showed the results of the questionnaire, which consisted of 10 multiple choice questions. According to teachers' responses to this questionnaire, it is noticed that all participants agreed that most ASD students have difficulties with expressive language.

They also agreed that ASD student's expressive language was weak before joining the school (question 2). For question 3, the majority of the responses (96.7%) agreed that there was an improvement in the development of expressive language of ASD students after joining school and after attending speech therapy sessions. Concerning the 4th question, the majority of the responses (90%) agreed that teaching children by using playing in groups technique helps in developing their expressive language while (23.3%) of the teachers did not find a noticeable effect of group playing method on their ASD students. Regarding the 5th question, (76.7%) of the teachers agreed that ASD students can form a full sentence. The responses of the 6th question showed that the majority of the teachers (73.3%) agreed that using technology while teaching helps in developing the expressive language of ASD students, but the minority (26.7%) did not find it useful. In the 7th question, (66.7%) of the participants agreed that ASD students take from one to two semesters to be trained on using expressive language while (33.3%) of the participants to some extent agreed that ASD students could take one or two

semesters to develop their expressive language. Concerning the 8th question, the majority of the participants (60%) agreed that there was a follow up from ASD student's families to develop their children expressive language. The other (40%) of the participants disagreed that ASD student's families do not give enough attention and care for developing their child expressive language. According to the 9th question the majority of the teachers (80%) find that to some extent ASD students families follow the strategies and instructors from the therapist. Only (13,3%) of the teachers find that the families do not follow the therapist instructions. In the 10th question the majority of the teachers (73.3%) found that ASD student's families do not have the full awareness of the importance of developing the expressive language of their ASD child. The minority of the teachers (26,7%) agreed.

Questionnaire results show that students with ASD were weak in expressive language before being trained. Strategies and methods like group playing help in developing expressive language. The majority of teachers found that using technology was useful in improving the child's expressive language. The majority of teachers found that most of ASD students were able to form a full sentence during two semesters at maximum. To some extent families of ASD students follow up their child's expressive language development with their teachers.

4.2. Interview Results

1- What is expressive language from your point of view?

In the semi-structured interview, 7 ASD teachers gave the same definition for expressive language. One of them said "it is any behaviour shown by ASD student to express his needs (signs, gesture and body language)"

2- How to develop expressive language of ASD students?

Three teachers' provided the same answer to the question "using pictures and games through learning process helps a lot in developing expressive language". Another teacher has a different point of view "developing expressive language happens by two main factors eye contact and continued speech with ASD student".

3- As a specialist, what are the difficulties you faced while teaching ASD students on expressive language?

This question was about the difficulties that face the teachers and almost all of them gave the same answer "ASD student big issue is about their focusing and attention" this means that ASD students could be distract easily and they have to be in a preprepared environment for them. Three teachers added another comment said "an important reason of difficulties is the ASD student's family". If the family do not follow up with the therapist, this could be a serious issue.

4- What are the methods and strategies you use to develop expressive language of ASD students?

There are many ways to teach ASD students to develop their expressive language. They found: visual learning, learning by playing and direct speech useful teach to develop expressive language. One teacher said "from my experience I see that using Applied Behaviour Analysis might be the best way to develop expressive language".

5- Regarding the 4th question, what was the most effective strategy you used?

The majority in this question agreed that visual learning and learning by playing were effective in developing the expressive language of ASD students.

6- Do ASD students' families care and follow up their child?

“It was a must to prepare one family member to be a therapist in the house by the speech therapist himself and this therapist should follow the instructions given by the speech therapist”. This answer grabbed my attention and gave me an idea of how serious dealing with ASD children could be. The rest of teachers sees that caring depends on the family itself and not all families are the same they were different in their knowledge of their child case and in taking care of their ASD child.

Interestingly, all teachers agreed that ASD students have difficulty focusing for a long time and they get distracted easily. The majority of teachers found that using methods like visual learning, group playing, modeling and direct speech are very effective in developing expressive language of ASD students.

Overall, results of the interview and questionnaire showed that expressive language of ASD students was weak before any intervention. Also, ASD students were not able to form a full sentence without help from their teachers and families. Methods like group playing and direct speech were important to develop expressive language of ASD students. Finally, families carelessness were the main factor of developing expressive language of ASD students.

This study demonstrated the perspective of teachers' for methods that were effective like group playing and virtual learning for teaching and developing ASD students' expressive language. However, several studies including this study demonstrated the effectiveness of using different methods to teach and develop expressive language of ASD students.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the development of expressive language of autism spectrum disorder students from their teachers' perspective. The research findings showed that most teachers had a positive perspective of using methods like group playing, visual learning and direct speech in improving ASD student's expressive language. Moreover, the responses of the questionnaire and interview indicated that not all families were giving the full attention and care in following the therapist instructions to help their child develop his/ her expressive language.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

This study applied for ASD students' teacher from Yanbu and Jeddah. The number of teachers was small and time was short. This study did not focus on ASD students ages or their school level.

5.2. Recommendations

After conducting this research, the researcher recommends that ASD students families should learn and care more about their ASD children to develop their expressive language. Also, teachers should apply more strategies like group playing, modeling and visual learning. I recommend that the programs (special education classes engaged in general education schools for all levels) which applied in Royal commission in Yanbu should be generalized to all around schools in Saudi Arabia.

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Appendix A – Questionnaire questions

- 1- Does the majority of ASD students have weakness in expressive language?
- 2- Does expressive language develop after speech therapy?
- 3- Is group playing useful in developing expressive language of ASD students?
- 4- Can ASD students form full sentence? (ex: I want to drink water)
- 5- Does technology help in developing expressive language of ASD students?
- 6- Do ASD students take long time to learn expressive language skills?
- 7- Are families following up the instruction?
- 8- Do families apply the strategies which were given by the therapist?
- 9- From your experience, do families have enough knowledge about the importance of developing expressive language of their ASD child?

Appendix B – Interview Questions

- 1- What is expressive language from your point of view?
- 2- How to develop expressive language of ASD students?
- 3- As a specialist, what are the difficulties you faced while teaching ASD students on expressive language?
- 4- What are the methods and strategies you use to develop expressive language of ASD students?
- 5- Regarding the 4th question, what was the most effective strategy you used?
- 6- Do ASD students' families care and follow up their child?