

COMMUNICATION DELAYS IN SPECIAL LEARNERS: PATTERNS, INTERVENTIONS, AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Introduction: Communication delays are common among special learners, affecting expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language skills, which can hinder social interaction, academic performance, and overall development. Early identification and targeted interventions are critical for promoting effective communication and learning outcomes. This study aimed to examine patterns of communication delays, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and explore contextual factors influencing language development among special learners.

Methods: A descriptive-correlational design was employed involving 100 special learners aged 5-12 years across three schools. Data were collected using the Communication Profile Assessment (CPA) to measure expressive and receptive skills, parent and teacher surveys regarding intervention frequency and support, and observational checklists during classroom and therapy sessions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression, while qualitative observations were coded thematically.

Results: Communication delays varied by learner profile. Children with autism spectrum disorder exhibited pronounced social-pragmatic deficits, while those with speech and language disorders primarily showed expressive and articulation difficulties. Learners with intellectual disabilities demonstrated broad delays across both receptive and expressive domains. Intervention frequency, parental involvement, and structured classroom support were positively associated with improved communication outcomes ($p < 0.05$). Multimodal approaches, including visual aids and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, enhanced engagement and functional language use. Systemic challenges such as high student-teacher ratios, limited therapy resources, and inconsistent home reinforcement were identified as barriers.

Keywords: Communication Delay, Special Learners, Language Development, Intervention Strategies, Multimodal Support.

Introduction

Communication is a fundamental skill that enables social interaction, learning, and emotional development. For special learners, particularly children with developmental delays, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disabilities, or hearing impairments, communication challenges are a prevalent concern. Communication delays can manifest as difficulties in speech production, receptive and expressive language, social interaction, and pragmatic communication, impacting academic performance and social integration (Paul & Norbury, 2012).

Early identification and intervention are crucial in mitigating the long-term impact of communication

delays. Research suggests that timely support through speech-language therapy, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and structured interventions significantly improves language outcomes in special learners (ASHA, 2020). Despite this, gaps remain in understanding the variability of communication delays across different types of special learners, the effectiveness of interventions, and the contextual factors influencing progress, such as family involvement and classroom support.

The study aimed to:

1. Identify the types and severity of communication delays among special learners.

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2. Examine the effectiveness of interventions in improving communication skills.
3. Explore contextual and environmental factors that facilitate or hinder communication development.

Methods

Research Design

A descriptive-correlational design was employed to examine communication delays and associated factors among special learners. This approach allowed for exploration of relationships between communication abilities, intervention exposure, and environmental support.

Participants

The study included 100 special learners aged 5-12 years enrolled in special education programs across three schools. Participants had documented communication delays, including ASD (45%), speech and language disorders (35%), and intellectual disabilities (20%). 50 parents and 20 special education teachers were also included to provide complementary perspectives.

Instruments

1. **Communication Profile Assessment (CPA):** Assessed expressive and receptive language, speech intelligibility, and pragmatic skills (Paul & Norbury, 2012).
2. **Parent and Teacher Survey:** Collected data on intervention frequency, classroom support, and environmental factors.
3. **Observation Checklist:** Evaluated real-time communication interactions in classroom and therapy sessions.

Procedure

Data collection occurred over six weeks. Children were assessed individually using CPA. Parents and teachers completed surveys, and observations were conducted during regular classroom and therapy sessions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from CPA and surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression. Qualitative data from observations were analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns in communication behavior and contextual influences.

Results

Findings indicated that communication delays varied widely among participants, reflecting the heterogeneity of special learner profiles. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) exhibited the most pronounced pragmatic deficits, including difficulty initiating conversations, understanding social cues, interpreting non-verbal gestures, and

maintaining coherent dialogue. These learners often struggled with turn-taking, responding appropriately to questions, and sustaining engagement during peer interactions. Learners with speech and language disorders primarily demonstrated expressive language difficulties, such as limited vocabulary, inconsistent articulation, and challenges in forming grammatically correct sentences. Those with intellectual disabilities exhibited delays across both receptive and expressive domains, affecting comprehension, following instructions, and producing structured language outputs.

Quantitative analysis revealed that intervention frequency was positively correlated with communication improvement ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, children receiving three or more therapy sessions per week demonstrated significant gains in vocabulary acquisition, sentence construction, and social communication, compared to those with fewer sessions. Regression analysis also showed that parental involvement (e.g., reinforcement of communication strategies at home) and structured classroom support (e.g., consistent prompts, peer interaction opportunities) were significant predictors of progress ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$).

Observational data further highlighted that learners responded most effectively to multimodal interventions, including visual aids, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, gesture cues, and structured social scripts. Teachers emphasized that classroom routines that facilitated peer-to-peer interaction, repetitive practice, and immediate feedback improved both engagement and functional communication. However, participants faced systemic barriers, including high student-to-teacher ratios, limited access to therapy resources, inconsistent home reinforcement, and scheduling constraints that reduced intervention exposure.

Discussion

The results confirm that communication delays among special learners are highly heterogeneous, varying in type and severity based on developmental profiles. Children with ASD showed pronounced deficits in social-pragmatic communication, consistent with Tager-Flusberg et al. (2017), highlighting difficulties in initiating, maintaining, and interpreting social language. Learners with speech and language disorders primarily faced expressive and articulation challenges, whereas those with intellectual disabilities experienced widespread deficits across receptive and expressive domains. These findings underscore the need for individualized, learner-centered interventions that target specific deficits rather than employing uniform strategies.

The positive correlation between intervention frequency and communication outcomes aligns with established literature emphasizing the importance of intensive, structured, and consistent therapy in facilitating language development (ASHA, 2020). Regular exposure to targeted interventions strengthens neural pathways associated with language acquisition and reinforces skill generalization across settings.

Furthermore, parental involvement and classroom support emerged as critical facilitators of progress. Parents who actively engaged in reinforcing communication strategies at home and teachers who implemented structured prompts, peer modeling, and repeated practice significantly enhanced learning outcomes. These findings support the concept that communication development is a collaborative, context-dependent process, involving the active participation of educators, therapists, and families.

However, observational data reveal that therapy alone is insufficient. Multimodal strategies - including visual cues, AAC, gestures, and social scripts - combined with structured peer interaction, were essential in sustaining engagement and retention. Systemic barriers such as limited resources, high classroom ratios, and inconsistent reinforcement at home continue to impede progress. These challenges highlight the importance of holistic intervention approaches, integrating therapy, classroom-based support, parental involvement, and adaptive technologies to optimize communication outcomes.

Conclusion

Communication delays among special learners can be mitigated through individualized, intensive interventions combined with parental and classroom support. Multimodal strategies enhance skill acquisition, but systemic barriers must be addressed to optimize outcomes. Holistic, collaborative approaches are essential for fostering communication competence and overall development in special learners.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this manuscript.

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