

Teaching of Language Skills to Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study aimed to describe the teaching experiences, coping mechanisms, insights, and new teaching techniques of teachers in teaching language skills to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) amidst pandemic. This study used a qualitative research design and the Colaizzi analysis strategy in analyzing the results. The five licensed Special Education teachers in both elementary and high school levels were selected through purposive sampling. The researchers constructed an interview guide and conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews. Findings and analyses of the study showed that the sudden shift of the programs and the intensified difficulty in getting the attention of the students with ASD were the challenges these teachers experienced. Consequently, the teachers motivated themselves to continue teaching, but sometimes the support from various support systems was inadequate. Further, they adapted a medical strategy and modified some traditional techniques to ensure the effectiveness of the instruction. The teachers can take advantage of the impairments with their teaching techniques.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A global pandemic modifies the natural process of teaching and learning, which requires action with the shift of educational programs. In the Philippines, there is a shifting of instructional programs in Special Education such as self-contained or special class, itinerant teaching, resource room, pull-out, integration/mainstreaming (partial and complete integration), and inclusion to distance learning programs. Henceforth, this situation poses even more significant challenges to teachers teaching language skills to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In the United States, the Department of Education's Office of Special Education Program (2020) has ensured reliable online documents and videos to support the Individualized Education Program (IEP) online instructions. Moreover, there is a shifting of instructional programs for Special Education like IEP to remote learning, including different options for teachers and learners that are maximizable for other set-ups. These options are web conferencing, video calls, phone

calls, individual texts, email or mail, and even private chats, which guarantees the intervention for learners with special needs [1].

It is evident that these instructional programs are not for online classes or meant for any significant adaptation. The shifting of programs would be time-dependent for teachers who consider the adjustment period needed by learners with special needs, particularly under Autism Spectrum Disorder. More so, individuals with ASD are overly dependent on routines, making them highly sensitive and resistant to changes in their environment [2]. Thus, the time of adjusting to distance learning programs is already a challenge for teachers. Students with ASD also lose access to social interaction and constant dialogue with their peers, which is equally essential for their development and learning. Additionally, the disruption in training for teachers and the lack of availability of teaching resources affect their confidence in handling the classes in an irregular learning environment. Thus, this study has a connection to Burrhus Frederic Skinner's Verbal Behavior Theory (1957) because it provides practical ways to effectively teach language skills to students with ASD even amidst a global pandemic.

Further, it is with a particular concern that few existing studies describe the teaching experiences of teachers who are teaching language skills to learners with ASD, specifically in a time of the global pandemic. Few works [3, 4, 5] focused only on teaching and improving the language skills of learners with ASD. These studies deal with different outbreaks like SARs in 2003 and MERS-Cov in 2012, wherein it described the teaching of language skills to learners with ASD yet did not affect the shifting to distance learning.

Moreover, the increasing challenges the pandemic poses require the teachers to take extra measures in ensuring the learning of the students with ASD that is vital in the development of lifelong skills of the students. As claimed by Partington (2013), most children with autism or other developmental disabilities experience severe language disorders, adding to the difficulty of teaching language skills even to professionals. Also, the most challenging groups for educators include students with ASD (Smith, 2011). By understanding the teachers' experiences in these situations, we reveal a basis for improving the developing programs and teaching language skills to learners with ASD. We also aim to provide solutions to maximize the potential for individual learning through various learning programs regardless of the state the teachers and the learners are present.

This study sought to answer the following questions: (1) What are the obscure teaching experiences that teachers encountered in teaching language skills to students with ASD during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) How do teachers take up and respond to these challenges? (3) What knowledge and emerging teaching techniques can teachers share based on their teaching experiences?

2. METHOD

In this section, the researchers delineate the parts of the method which cover research design, research materials, and data analysis.

Research Design

This study used the qualitative design with the employment of phenomenological approach. This research design substantiated the context of education because it allowed the researchers to methodically investigate a phenomenon, specifically the research participants' lived experiences of teaching language skills to learners with ASD amidst a global pandemic. Also, the design provided flexibility to the study as its data collection and analysis process allowed new ideas to emerge. It extended the study to have meaningful insights and addressed the questions of how and why in the field of Special Education.

Research Participants

Using the purposive sampling technique, the five participants were chosen based on seven criteria: must have been teaching in public schools with established Special Education (SPED) center programs, must be teaching either in the elementary or high school level, must be SPED-trained, must be Licensed Professional Teachers (LPT), must have at least four years of teaching

experience, must be currently teaching in Davao City, Philippines, and must be teaching students with ASD during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis was utilized to construct detailed description and emergent themes, and to draw relationships that would best describe the teaching experiences, coping mechanisms, and teaching techniques of the participants. The researchers earnestly followed the seven steps of Colaizzi's data analysis namely *transcribe and familiarize, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive descriptions, fundamental structure, and validation of findings*.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the obscure teaching experiences that teachers encountered in teaching language skills to students with ASD during the COVID-19 pandemic, how those teachers take up and respond to these challenges, and the knowledge and emerging teaching techniques those teachers shared are presented. The discussion of the findings then follows contextualization with existing literatures.

3.1. Obscure Teaching Experiences Encountered in Teaching Language Skills to Students with ASD during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Accordingly, three participants asserted that the difficulty in adjusting to distance learning, such as the modular and online adaptation, had been the immediate and personal challenge in teaching language skills to students with ASD amidst a global pandemic. As described by [6], teachers typically neglect changes, especially in teaching practice or programs since they do not receive concrete instruction and competent assistance. Henceforth, they cannot envision the intended advantages that the changes have to offer.

Further, two participants stated that the difficulty in getting the attention or focus on distance learning was the real deal experience in teaching language skills to students with ASD amidst a global pandemic. As posited by [7], distance learning entails problems that include the student's concerns despite its promises and possibilities. With ASD, their impairment practically expects them to have disoriented attention and focus. It means that students in distance learning, and more so with ASD, need more assistance from teachers than in a traditional setup.

Overall, teaching language skills to students with ASD in a global pandemic is substantially challenging considering the triad of impairments, the host of distractions present in the students' homes, and both the technical and personal difficulties experienced by the teachers. May it be known or obscure, the persistence of professional individuals is evident.

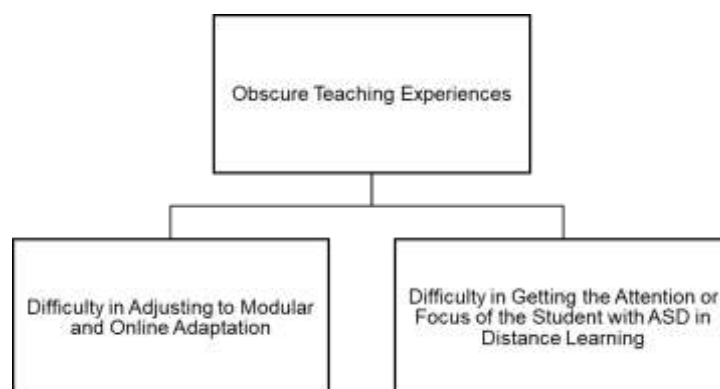


Figure 1. Obscure Teaching Experiences Encountered in Teaching Language Skills to Students with ASD during the COVID-19 Pandemic

3.1.1. The Importance of Seminars, Workshops, and Training Among Teachers in Shifting Distance Learning

Shifting from face-to-face learning to distance learning can be an unusual event for both teachers and students with ASD, which heavily impacts the teachers in changing their methods of teaching and the students with ASD in changing their routines. There are IEPs designed for students with ASD to be able to persevere in life. However, those are unsuitable in distance learning, where students with ASD have a limited screen time with a maximum of 30 minutes. Teachers who have undergone online teaching induce a sufficient level of confidence in shifting programs, but teachers who lack experience with technologies can feel stressed and unprepared for this change [1].

It is evident in the responses of Participants 2, 4, and 5:

“The real challenge in this teaching setup is the poor internet connection.

So, I use the modular distance learning.” –Participant 2

“I am not a digital native. I cried for a week because I could not understand how to use those applications to teach my students with ASD. I am frustrated in attending seminars that taught us, teachers, how to use applications like Google and Kahoot. Soon enough, I realized that a teacher is the best visual aid for the students.” –Participant 4

“For almost a decade of teaching SPED, I have been attuned to face to face. However, with this setup, I don’t like it.” –Participant 5

Participant 2 experienced a poor internet connection in conducting distance learning. Participant 4 was not a digital native, which makes her anxious and frustrated. While Participant 5 was reluctant to the changing of programs. In the light of all this problem, the Department of Education Region XI had conducted an online discussion to address the growing concern of having a poor and unstable internet connection, lack of ICT equipment for teachers and students, and visual presentation of lessons.

Moreover, the educational systems must conduct additional professional training for the teachers about online instruction, designed to assist them in changing instructional programs to be suited to distance learning (Rebora, 2020). Additional professional knowledge such as seminars and workshops can help update teachers about the new ways of teaching students with ASD in distance learning.

Distance learning involves the necessity for educators to reach a certain level of preparedness and competence to utilize the options for communicating and teaching the students with ASD and their parents, as further discussed by [1]. It creates an effective learning environment for the students with ASD using innovative ways of teaching.

Consequently, schools should continuously provide professional development to the teachers, like tutorials about Google Classroom or Zoom. More so, they should maximize educating teachers about the newly introduced online and blended learning techniques and the use of digital technology in teaching [8]. Therefore, there is a need to conduct seminars, workshops, and online training for the SPED teachers to teach students with ASD effectively amidst the change in programs.

3.1.2. Maintenance of Attention and Focus Among Students with ASD in Distance Learning

Students with ASD experience problems with executive function skills; it involves planning, remembering, reasoning, restraining and controlling actions, and most especially, paying attention, as described by [9]. Also, students with ASD have a narrow focus and difficulty paying attention [10]. Maintaining or getting the attention and direction of the students with ASD is challenging since students with ASD often can concentrate on something keenly but find it strenuous to direct and control their stress.

It is even challenging with the change in programs as they find transition stressful and may become anxious since they prefer familiarity, order, structure, and predictability. Disruption in

routines may result in negative behaviors that may include the difficulty of drawing in their attention. More so, this might result in their inability to communicate with their teachers.

It is evident in the responses of Participants 1 and 3:

“Even though I am teaching young adult students with ASD, it is still a challenge to transition them to a new mode of learning since they have no focus.” –Participant 1

“There is also a difficulty in getting the attention of the students with ASD during virtual follow-ups.” –Participant 3

Participant 4 also provided substantial information in such a challenge with a different perspective. As evident in the response:

“I only provide one session per week that only lasts for 30 minutes screen time since they easily get irritated with light and background noises.” –Participant 4

Students with ASD have hypersensitivity issues, particularly in noise and light (Bogdashina, 2015). With distance learning, students with ASD would not bear to wear earplugs or headphones as it would make them disrupted rather than focused on the lessons. In addition, [11] claimed that when students with ASD are in a loud environment, they display many repetitive behaviors and repetitive speech, which shows that they are in distress.

Also, students with ASD do not like looking at anything with bright lights or fluorescent lights such as laptops or computer screens, as these would cause them distorted visions. These specific problems have been considered by Participant 4. Hence, Participant 4 opted only to have a once-a-week session that only lasts for 30 minutes of screen time.

3.2. How Teachers Take Up and Respond to the Challenges

Based on the results, three participants have cultivated teacher motivation amongst themselves. Particularly, teachers teaching in an unlikely situation, such as being in a global pandemic, cope and continue teaching. Their drive also reflects the outcomes in a learning environment, as claimed by [12]. Hence, their motivation and drive uplift the learning process.

Moreover, all research participants maximized the support they can get from different people and organizations. The aid given amongst teachers allows them to overcome difficulties in instruction, help learners attain specific competencies, and provide substantial knowledge and skills. Essentially, it helps them obtain professional development.

Therefore, teachers take up and respond in the most rudimentary yet effective ways. It is also pertinent that these practitioners are masters in giving support, yet they do not impose too much whenever they need help. Instead, they cope with educational changes regardless of one’s functionality or condition.

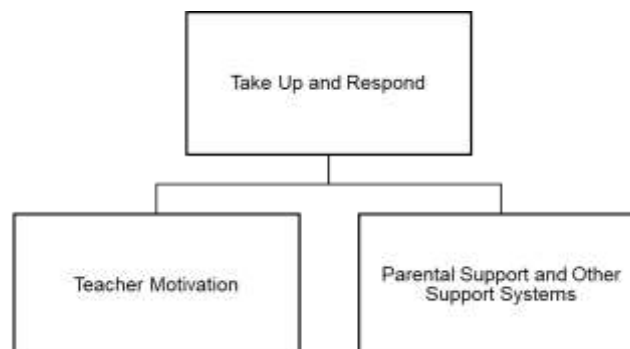


Figure 2. How Teachers Take Up and Respond to the Challenges

3.2.1. The Importance of Teacher Motivation

Teacher motivation has been one of the terms linked to both psychology and education. It is viewed or perceived as the energy or the personal drive that a teacher possesses. Consequently, [13] emphasized teacher motivation as attraction, retention, and concentration to the profession. It also somehow determines the involvement and longevity of the teacher in service. It is also highly defined as the intrinsic value to continue and choose to teach.

However, [14] reported that during the start of pandemic schooling, the only crucial point viewed by many people was how to keep the students motivated. While the lack or little regard as to how to keep the teachers motivated was evident. Subsequently, teachers experienced many occurring challenges in this educational setting, from adjustment period to curriculum limitations such as the lack of enough resources and services to accommodate the needs of the students with ASD. Hence, these most likely affect the teacher.

It is evident in the responses of Participants 2, 3, and 4.

“It always motivates me to teach students with ASD knowing that they deserve quality education amidst this pandemic.” –Participant 2

“What motivates me is that they need to continue learning.” –Participant 3

“The bible verses, “Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do it unto me”, and “When you do, do it for the glory of God” are what inspire me to continue in teaching students with ASD.” –Participant 4

Participants 2 and 3 demonstrated an altruistic motivation. They care more about providing quality education. They also think more of the shared learning rather than what difficulties they might experience in the process. Altruism is also about helping without expecting anything in return, as stated by Mayers (1993). It is a concept that identifies individuals who are willing to sacrifice and redirect their energy towards helping others without any external reward (Macaulay & Berkowitz, 1970).

Further, altruistic motivation is one of the most substantial factors of teachers in teaching (Scott & Dinham, 1999). Moreover, Thompson (1994) considered teachers as caring professionals who characterized selfless assistance. Also, teachers provide service to students even in challenging situations, as highlighted by Mateer (1993). Thus, this makes them more concerned about meeting the needs of their students. Hence, more focused on what the students may gain. More so, Stracuzzi and Mills (2010) postulated that the altruistic motivation of the teacher promotes social-emotional well-being and positive youth development.

While Participant 4 demonstrated spiritual motivation. She highly seeks guidance from God to perform her duty well as a teacher. Accordingly, spiritual encouragement helps the teacher to cope up with stressful situations. Most SPED teachers practice it, which reduces their perceived stress in varied working conditions and any intentions of quitting the job [15]. Moreover, [16] argued that the teaching profession is not holistic without spiritual motivation. It is also labeled as finding the purpose of the job, in this case, teaching. It reminds teachers not to give up on educating students no matter how demanding the job may seem.

Therefore, teachers need teacher motivation as they work in social institutions like schools, which they adapt to the necessary changes, as based on Kotherja (2013). In this case, the researchers refer to these as technological advancements and working conditions, which is the strain caused by this global pandemic. Teachers need motivation even if they teach in a traditional classroom setup or distance learning since they go through many changes and challenges, as discussed by Cooper (2018). Moreover, if a teacher is motivated, they dedicate time to personalizing and individualizing learning. Henceforth, this creates a more conducive learning environment.

3.2.2 The Importance of Support Systems

A support system is a network of people- family, friends, and professional colleagues that provides emotional, informational, and even practical support [17]. Emotional support can be an expression of empathy, care, and trust. At the same time, informational support is in the form of advice, suggestions, and information. Additionally, it could also be instrumental through services or other given aids to support. Substantially, support systems established in schools primarily help teachers. However, in this time of the pandemic, everything has changed and shifted. Teachers also need a support system to help them continue what they are doing. In Education, support systems can include the school administrators and the tools used for teaching.

In this study, the research participants shared who are their support systems and if the given support was adequate. This is evident in the responses of all the research participants:

“However, what people do not know is that not all parents have the capacity to teach their children. This is because parents sometimes give priority to their work to provide food. Hence, it makes it difficult for me to teach the students with ASD because I need parental support as much as the children.” –Participant 1

“...I just told their parents to assist/train the children.” –Participant 2

“The good thing is that I have constant communication with the parents of my students with ASD.” –Participant 2

“Parents are the best support system in this time of difficulty. Their willingness to help their children learn indeed plays an important part in my teaching of language skills to students with ASD.” –Participant 2

“I crafted modules that provide activities which would develop not only one area but across all other learning areas of the student with ASD. The instructions of the modules are primarily made for the parents to follow. This is what we called parents upskilling.” – Participant 3

“We, teachers, collaborate with parents.” –Participant 3

“I always require the parents to be with their children because they are my partners in teaching. I consider them as one of the facilitators. They make 80% of the effort.” –Participant 4

“The parents, school, Department of Education, and God, all supported me.” –Participant 4

“...Sometimes, I send the questions beforehand so that all they need to do is read their answers in class, dictated by their parents.” –Participant 5

“...While I’m having my class, I give prior instructions to the parents as well.” –Participant 5

“...For the activity sheets, the parents can make the answers, but my students with ASD must write the answers.” – Participant 5

“I talk and give updates to the parents.” –Participant 5

“Our principal, SPED coordinator, and co-teachers supported me in adjusting. We have a group chat.” –Participant 5

All research participants have expressed the valuable support they get from parents of their students with ASD and their roles in this new educational setup. They also maintained good relationships and communication with the parents. It allowed them to collaborate in the learning of the students with ASD.

Further, Blackburn (2020) affirmed that professionals like SPED teachers most likely need the consistent involvement of the parents since they are the primary individuals who accompany their children in building their foundation in learning and even in transitioning to different life scenarios. Consequently, parents' participation in Special Education is vital as they provide critical input since they have a complete understanding of their children's physical, social, and developmental history [18]. Thus, SPED teachers most likely maintain open communication with parents and accept their insights. As recommended by [19] that parents and SPED teachers must work as a team. Also, children learn best when significant adults like their parents and teachers are working together to encourage and support them, as proposed by Comer and Haynes (1997).

In this setup, it is therefore essential for teachers to have parental support. It allows them to perform their job well. It also reduces their stress and provides a security that their students with ASD learned something even in distance learning. More so, [17] suggested that having a support system improved one's physical health and mental wellness. Individuals like teachers who need to adapt instantly to any given time and space can develop better coping mechanisms.

Participants 4 and 5 also mentioned the support given by the Department of Education, the school administrators, co-teachers, and guidance from God that they get. It is about the conducted parents' training and orientation of the Department of Education Region XI regarding the assistance that parents could provide for the learning management of the students with ASD in the new normal. Additionally, the given learning support aides to SPED teachers to promote a strengthened partnership amongst schools, households, and communities are valuable to the learning process of students with ASD.

3.3. Knowledge and Emerging Techniques Shared by Teachers

Following the results, the research participants displayed maximization of virtual follow-ups, music and nursery rhymes, question and answer activities, and visual support, and the implication of reinforcement and feedback in teaching language skills to students with ASD in distance learning.

Given that students with ASD can neither touch nor interact with the participants in person, virtual follow-ups allow the participants to collect data and evaluate the students' performance. Three participants expressed that they encourage and monitor students with ASD through virtual follow-ups. Also, it creates an opportunity for the teachers to stimulate the students to complete the activities and uplift them in times of discouragement.

Additionally, two participants identified music and nursery rhymes as an effective way of teaching language skills to students with ASD. Incorporating music into teaching creates an interactive atmosphere and allows socialization amongst the students with ASD, which reduces their anxiety. Music helps deal with behavioral problems of the students with ASD and allows a comfortable learning environment [20].

Moreover, asking the students questions and letting them answer accommodates the deficit of the students with ASD, allowing the students to express themselves. Two participants stated the question-and-answer activities enhance the language skills of the students with ASD. [21] indicated that teachers could maximize memorized responses for questions in determining the similarities and differences of things. Questions that require non-factual answers do not use learned responses, leaving the students with ASD to utilize their comprehension skills to answer the questions.

Further, the research participants utilized different strategies in ensuring the active involvement of the students with ASD in the learning process. Four participants exhibited that they use printed visual supports, while one participant uses digital and printed visual aids. [22] postulated that visual supports promote a foundation of verbal communication for the students with ASD to develop their speaking skills. It guarantees that the students with ASD comprehend the instruction, lessons, and activities and address frustrations and anxiety.

Substantially, the research participants applied reinforcement and feedback. One participant stated that students enhance their fine motor skills with the help of motivation, whereas two participants highlighted giving compliments on the progress, which encourages the students with ASD. Distinguishing the correct behavior from the improper one polishes the behavior of the students.

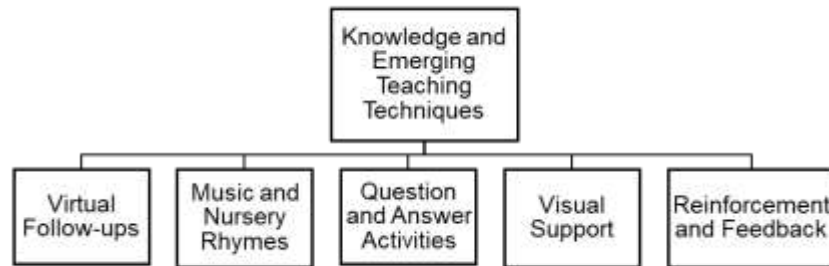


Figure 3. Knowledge and Emerging Techniques Shared by the Teachers

3.3.1. The Function of Virtual Follow-ups

Distance learning limits the constant day-to-day communication of the teachers and students with ASD since the teachers need to follow the restricted type of adaptation used by the institution. However, [23] asserted that distance learning is an opportunity for teachers to monitor their students with ASD one by one.

For instance, teachers can conduct a one-on-one conference to check the progress using the learning competencies and record the meeting to let the student with ASD review what they had discussed and take down notes until they master the topic. Moreover, it allows the students with ASD to be motivated and encouraged through receiving praises or feedback from their teachers while seeing their progress weekly. Thus, the research participants assimilated a new approach to do so without putting strain on the students with ASD.

It is evident in the responses of Participants 1, 2, and 3:

"... I scheduled a virtual follow-up once a week to assist their learning."

–Participant 1

"I also encourage them through virtual follow-ups." –Participant 2

"I collaborate with parents and do virtual follow-ups." –Participant 3

The three research participants refer to it as virtual follow-ups. Originally called Telehealth, advanced support for long-distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education (World Health Organization, 2018). In this case, Participants 1, 2, and 3 maximized it as counseling sessions with both the students and parents. It is to assess the academic progress of the students with ASD as well as their well-being. It also allows them to gather data to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction and activities and decide what other tasks to give next. Moreover, Soares and Langkamp (2012) considered the approach efficient as it only involved fewer procedures and more direct interviewing.

3.3.2. The Effectivity of Music and Nursery Rhymes

Individuals with ASD have a specific musical tone that allows them to react positively to music and sounds despite having noise sensitivity, as argued by [24]. Subsequently, Lim (2010) proved that music could improve the vocal production of students with ASD. Also, music and other songs like nursery rhymes help students with ASD develop speech and vocal repertoire. It also enhances the attention span, especially in listening skills [25].

It is evident in the responses of Participants 1 and 2:

"For listening skills, music is the best therapy..." –Participant 1

“For listening and speaking skills, I incorporate nursery rhymes.” –Participant 2

Communication difficulties of individuals with ASD are overcome using music therapy as it improved four elements of ASD: both non-verbal and verbal communication, eye contact, and facial expression [26]. Also, Yang (2016) asserted that listening and making music can develop the receptive and expressive language of students with ASD. Further, [27] reported that students with ASD have higher levels of engagement and learning spoken words by singing. Additionally, teachers must sing with students with ASD when teaching with music, as clarified by [28]. Teaching using music increases retention.

Subsequently, singing social stories to students with ASD results in achieving a particular behavioral goal [29]. Kim (2009) also affirmed that music improves eye contact and emotional synchronicity. Further, music can help students with ASD develop communication, social, behavioral, and academic skills to function successfully in society (Fang, 2009). Also, it is best to engage students with ASD in repetitive activities and movements such as music since they are submissive to routine or anything that has predictability (Kosmeral, 2011).

3.3.3. The Effectivity of Question-and-Answer Activities

As posited by [30], individuals with ASD have difficulty initiating conversations. They have limited communication cues, which also diagnose them as nonverbal. More so, they do not understand the facial expressions of the people around them or simply the give and take nature of the conversation. Hence, extensive efforts are required to support them in producing words or starting a simple talk.

It is evident in the responses of Participants 1 and 5:

“...For speaking skills, I talk and ask questions to students with ASD, then allow them to answer. I also assist them in answering in a sentence...”

–Participant 1

“When I have my online class, I allow them to speak. If I ask them questions, I need to simplify. Since they cannot expound, I still try to ask follow-up questions, but I always accept whatever their answers are. When I give them activities as well, I let them answer orally. When they answer, I listen and do not interrupt. Sometimes, I send the questions beforehand so that all they need to do is read their answers in class, dictated by their parents.” –Participant 5

Both participants 1 and 5 believe that question and answer can improve the speaking skills of their students with ASD. As [31] proposed, the teachers or even parents of students with ASD may ask factual questions. They only must think of one answer since they tend to stick with their learned responses rather than describing something. Also, asking WH questions to students with ASD is possible with the support of pictures, flashcards, games, adapted books, and conversation cards [32]. All these help students with ASD to develop their expressive language more.

Moreover, there is a significant impact when teachers exercise questioning to students with ASD, especially with their capacity to be independent and to participate in activities, actions, and reactions that characterized contexts (Hacker, 1999). Solidifying WH questions will also help the students with ASD to be responsive. They can easily associate and think of when as time, where as place, what as things or actions, who as persons, and why as reasons. Additionally, this helps them develop comprehension as well, which is rare amongst individuals with ASD.

3.3.4. The Effectivity of Visual Support

The National Autistic Society (2020) highlighted visual support as the best communication tool to improve understanding, build confidence, and stimulate social interaction amongst students with ASD. Several researchers claimed that most students with ASD processed visual information more. In distance learning, teachers must maximize visual support to ensure that students with ASD grasped the lesson.

It is evident in the responses of all the research participants:

“I give modules, worksheets, and other supplementary activity sheets.”

–Participant 1

“Since one of my concerns is that students with ASD will be more exposed to gadgets, I provide them eye-catching modules and pictures instead, especially for their reading and writing skills.” –Participant 2

“I am more specific in teaching reading and writing. So, I give printed modules.” –Participant 3

“I also use PowerPoint Presentation and YouTube.” –Participant 4

“For speaking skills, I let them bring pictures then say something about them. For listening and reading skills, I provide them stories full of pictures. I also use flashcards. I incorporate reading text activities. For writing skills, I provide worksheets once a week to enhance their fine motor skills.” –Participant 4

“For writing, I let them draw. For the activity sheets, the parents can make the answers, but my students with ASD must write the answers.” –Participant 5

“I do not give them modules. I improvised and give [gave] them colorful activity sheets that are applicable to them.” –Participant 5

The research participants heavily rely on visual supports in responding to the needs of the students with ASD in teaching in distance learning. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 5 used more visual support through modules, worksheets, and other printed materials. While Participant 4 utilized both digital and printed visual aid. Both strategies allow the student with ASD to be actively involved in applying their knowledge and skills in the activities. Visual supports such as soft and hard copies enable the students with ASD to improve in communicating with their parents and teachers.

Visual supports allow the students with ASD to track the teacher’s words as they speak in giving instructions for an activity. It reduces the irritation and behaviors that they often feel and do when having difficulty communicating. Visual supports lessen the anxiety of the students with ASD by letting them know about the flow of the lesson and activity. More so, students with ASD nonverbal can develop comprehension when presented with visual aids [33].

3.3.5. The Importance of Reinforcement and Feedback

Reinforcing students with ASD with positive reinforcement is an effective way to assist them in both acquiring and maintaining skills over time. In distance learning, praising is one of the few ways to reinforce the students with ASD in performing the desired behavior. It is also one way to reward them for completing a task, which helps them improve and increase the chances of repeating the desired behavior. The research participants used reinforcement and feedback to their students with ASD, particularly in teaching language skills.

It is evident in the responses of Participants 1, 4, and 5:

“To motivate my students with ASD, I give them positive reinforcement.”

–Participant 1

“...For writing skills, I provide a scribbling, gripping, tracing, and coloring reinforcement because students with ASD have poor fine motor skills.” –Participant 1

“I only give positive feedback to the students with ASD, but I give

the actual one to the parents.” –Participant 4

*“I provide positive feedback and praises to my students with ASD.”
–Participant 5*

Reinforcement is more than just an item, as emphasized by [34]. In relation, Participant 1 motivates and develops the fine motor skills of students with ASD. Positive reinforcement encourages the students with ASD to repeat the desired behavior out of them with the help of the stimulants or reinforcers added such as rewards, praises, or motivations.

On the other hand, Participants 4 and 5 emphasized commending the progress of the students with ASD. Giving feedback on students’ progress with ASD enlightened them of the correct and incorrect behavior or response to the task, as proved by [35]. Reinforcement and feedback are applied to both occurrences to achieve the desired behavior and response during their class in distance learning.

Moreover, Autism New Jersey (2020) recommended that teachers should be able to determine the necessary quantity of the reinforcement applied to keep on receiving the desired behavior of the students with ASD. Further, there should be an equal amount of effort with the support used. Thus, giving support and feedback may vary on how the teachers may encourage and motivate the students with ASD to be actively involved in the learning process.

4. CONCLUSION

After thorough analyses, the researchers found out that research participants implicitly associated the Verbal Behavior Theory. Out of the four primary verbal operants, three were highly observed and used by the research participants; these are echoic, tact, and intraverbals.

First, echoic was maximized by Participants 1 and 2 through the use of music and nursery rhymes. The teaching practice of associating music to produce vocal repertoire amongst students with ASD is an indication of echoic, in which the teachers allow the imitation to happen. Further, Participant 5’s inculcate echoic practice by allowing the students with ASD to repeat the answers read by their parents in the class.

Second, the teacher could use tact in teaching language skills through music. Language skills improved when teachers used manual signs, labeling tasks, and songs compared to plain-spoken communication, as claimed by Buday (1995). Tact was also observed by Participant 4 by allowing the student to bring a picture and say something about it.

Lastly, intraverbals were utilized by Participants 1 and 5 through the question-and-answer activities. Incorporating such activities would allow students with ASD to be involved in conversations even in the comfort of their homes. It would allow them to create concepts about everyday occurrences and increase their opportunities (Schnee, 2020). Moreover, Reeve (2017) asserted that question and answer activities should be progressive despite the restricted and repetitive answers given by students with ASD.

Allowing them to answer factual questions would be easier since they aim for one particular answer that they could quickly memorize over time. It could result in forming a routine in answering. Then, asking for opinions and even relating questions to feelings and experiences can practice their expressive language. More importantly, asking why questions can improve their reasoning. It will allow the teacher to develop a way of understanding and knowing their whims, fears, preferences, and even demands. Thus, the verbal operant mand could be incorporated next.

Overall, the researchers have learned the commonality of the research participants’ lived experiences. Despite all the challenges, they have emerged as thriving individuals who provide service to students with ASD even with the apparent unpreparedness and the lack of support, particularly in resources. Further, they have maximized their knowledge and even developed teaching techniques that are particular in this time of a global pandemic.

Subsequently, COVID-19 is not synonymous with distance learning. However, it has become associated, especially in the field of Education. It caused several challenges to Special Education such as disruption in ASD’s usual routine like going to school, having social interaction with peers, learning with teachers, and going to special services. It means that the more challenging

it is, the more it is needed to teach a lifelong skill that would allow them to practice their social function.

It implied that teachers, regardless of whether they are struggling or not, will continue to teach despite all the challenges and considerations because they know the importance of language skills to students with ASD. Therefore, teaching language skills to young students with ASD establishes their mental capacity to understand and builds their confidence to produce words. While teaching language skills to older students with ASD develops their ability to relate and communicate, independence, and practicality in life.

Thus, the researchers would imply that the teachers open themselves to change since a global pandemic caused a shift in programs. Henceforth, they must practice flexible teaching, which they can adapt and adjust well. Given the emergence of technologies as the primary options when physical schooling stopped, the teachers must acquire basic ICT skills. Further, it proves relevant since digital technologies and software compose most of the modalities and materials used by educational systems.

Moreover, the change in educational setup also emerges parents as one of the critical figures determined to play an important role. Thus, parents must exercise engagement in the process, regardless if they know the lessons or not. They must initiate to ask and even conduct a self-research to support the students with ASD and the teachers.

Furthermore, schools must also be agile in spreading awareness, such as celebrating Autism Awareness Month and National Autism Consciousness Week through a scheduled online setup attended by SPED teachers, parents, students with ASD, and curriculum developers. There is also a need for the schools with an established SPED program to conduct more research concerning their impairments, associating it with varying and specific conditions and settings such as a pandemic, war, and other global issues that may result in necessary changes in Education. It would allow them to have an adaptive arrangement in policies and processes.

Substantially, the Department of Education must have realized the profound need to conduct seminars, workshops, and training amongst teachers and administrators to professionally prepare them and provide mental conditioning of what they might encounter throughout the school year. The conducting of seminars and orientations to parents support them in acquiring knowledge and skills, primarily in assisting the teachers in teaching students with ASD.

Notably, the pandemic caused economic challenges that affected the families of students with ASD in sending them to special services, without, of course, the support of the school since the shutdown and restriction of facilities. Therefore, they must offer free services for Speech and Occupational Therapies. Also, they must produce highly visual instructional materials and assistive devices, considering their proven efficiency.

Lastly, curriculum developers must develop the conceptualization and formulation of a virtual workspace or an e-learning program with specific features for Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is to substantially provide familiarity and ease amongst teachers, parents, and students with ASD. It would also be best to organize a congressional event for students with ASD to showcase their ability in language skills. It is to provide them a rich and meaningful exposure.

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