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خصائص اللغة لدى الأطفال التوحديين والتدخل المبكر داخل حجرة الدراسة

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the language characteristics of autistic children and early classroom intervention. It also highlights the need for developing teachers' awareness of autistic children for improving learning outcomes. Autism might continue till adulthood if proper and adequate care and attention is not given. Although autism is described as a disorder of neural development characterized by impaired social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and by restricted, repetitive or stereotyped behavior, this article stresses that a significant minority of individuals appear to be without any linguistic abnormality and that parents, educators and caregivers should not be frustrated when communication with autistics is ineffective. There have been experts in various fields who were autistics.

Key Words: Autistic Children, Autism, Language Impairment, Language Development, Language Characteristics.

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية خصائص اللغة لدى الأطفال التوحدين والتدخل المبكر داخل حجرة الدراسة. كما أنها تلقي الضوء على الحاجة لتنمية وعي المعلمين بالأطفال التوحدين من أجل تحسين نتائج تعلمهم، إذ قد يستمر التوحد إلى سن البلوغ إذا لم يلق عنايةً واهتماماً بشكل مناسب وكافٍ. وعلى الرغم من أن التوحد يوصف بأنه إضطراب في نمو الجهاز العصبي، وأن هذا الاضطراب متسم بالإعاقة الاجتماعية والخلل في التواصل اللفظي وغير اللفظي، والسلوك المتكرر، فإن هذه الورقة تؤكد بأن هناك أقلية من الأفراد من ذوي الشأن لم تكن لديهم أية اضطرابات لغوية وأن على الوالدين والمربين والقائمين على رعاية الأطفال التوحدين ألاَّ يُحبطوا عندما يكون التواصل مع الأطفال التوحدين غير فعال، فقد برع عدد من الخبراء المتميزين في مجالات شتى من بين التوحدين.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful tool humans are endowed with for proper and effective communication. Language development is a complicated process that starts at birth, then later, the child learns it by applying sounds to images in a process called internalization. Research shows that by the end of the first 48 months, the child will have acquired the basic skills in language use and a vocabulary limited mostly to their experience (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 1996; Foudon, Reboul, & Manufact, 2008; Eigsti, et al., 2011; Prainsson, 2012). In order to get their immediate wants and needs fulfilled, the child enhances his grasp of language in the surrounding socio cultural context with parents and peers.

2. AUTISM AND AUTISTIC CHILDREN

Autism is a disorder of neural development characterized by impaired social interaction and verbal and non-verbal communication, and by restricted, repetitive or stereotyped behavior (Like and Cheng, 2013). It involves primary impairments in both language and communication (Kjelgaard & Tager-Flusberg, 2001). The term “Autism” was first identified by the American psychologist, Leo Kanner in 1943, when he noticed a subgroup of children were unable to relate in the ordinary way to other people and situations and as a result, he described this behavior as “extreme autistic aloneness” and later on the disorder was known as autism (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2007).

According to the American Psychiatric Association, (1994), there are three areas through which autism can be diagnosed; social interaction, communication, and a severely restricted repertoire of activity and interests that can be observed before the age of three. Robinson (2011: 8-9) states that “this disorder can be easily detected at age of 3. This is probably so because most normal children are able to talk at this age”. In addition, the US National Academy of Sciences (2015) shows that autism “affects essential human behaviors such as social interaction, the ability to communicate ideas and feelings, imaginations, and the establishment of relationships with others”, (p.11).

A recent research study reported that autism now affects approximately 1 in 88 children in the United States (CDC, 2012). In addition, The British Autistic National Society (2015) shows that

more than 1 out of every 100 people has autism, and that more than 1 person in a family may have autism. Moreover, a tremendous amount of research shows that individuals of all ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds are affected by autism (Foudon, et al., 2008; Chien, Lin, Chou, & Pesus, 2011; Kim et al., 2011).

3. LANGUAGE CHARACTERISTICS IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

The early signs of autistic children as mentioned by some researchers (Bogdashina 2004; Belkadi, 2006; Manolitsi and Botting, 2011; Alqawasmi, 2012; McDonald, 2014) include a list of these characteristics, such as the delayed development of spoken language, having difficulty using forms of communication to compensate for delayed language development, inconsistent response to sounds, displaying a lack of interest in simple social games, having a vocabulary of less than 50 single words and /or two word phrases, echolalia, pronoun reversal, extreme literalness, metaphorical language, neologism, affirmation by repetition, repetitive questioning, demanding the same verbal scenario, autistic discourse style, and poor control of prosody.

4. AUTISTIC LANGUAGE ORIENTED RESEARCH

Lately, colossal amount of research and resources on “How to Educate Autistic Students” have been made available. Eigsti et al., (2007) explored grammatical abilities in autism. Their study sample included 16– five–year old children of both sexes. The conversations made by these children during a free time session were recorded,

transcribed and analyzed. Results showed that there were many syntactic deficiencies made by these children but also their language had ‘a few grammatical morphemes’.

Monolitsi & Botting (2011) investigated the language abilities of a sample of 26 Greek autistic children who were tested and evaluated using standardized structural and pragmatic language tests and a structured narrative measures. Results showed that autistic children were impaired on receptive language. In addition, narrative measures revealed that these children have poorer performance in expressive skills.

One of the common features of autism is the notable delay in the linguistic development of children. However, Whitehouse et al (2007) are with the opinion that although many individuals with autism display severe deficits with expressive and receptive language, a significant minority of individuals appear to be without any linguistic abnormality (Whitehouse, et al., 2007). In addition, Baron-Cohen, (1995) states that children with autism have been found to have impaired phonological skills. For instance, their speech systematically lacks intonation and can best be described as monotonous.

It has been found that among the difficulties of using language by children with autism is the use of pronouns such as “you” and “me” in, who sometimes reverse them (for example, using “you” to refer to oneself) or avoid them in favor of names. Moreover, children with autism have difficulty with pronouns regardless whether those pronouns are spoken or signed (Meier ,2015) .

However, the American Rocky Point Academy in Alberta (2009) summarizes a list of the linguistic language developments of Autistic children. The list includes characteristics, such as the abnormal use of pitch, intonation, rhythm or stress while speaking, speech is abnormally loud or quiet, difficulty whispering, repeating last words or phrases several times, making verbal sounds while listening (echolalia), using short, incomplete sentences, using inappropriate pronouns, using a person's name excessively when speaking to them ("Mary, we are having lunch. Right, Mary?"), starting speech very early and then stopped for a period of time, and having difficulty understanding directional terms (front, back, before, after) (Rocky Point Academy, 2009).

Lord and Paul (1997) mention that there are children who possess a normal range of functioning in terms of vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and articulation skills. Kjelgaard and Tager-Flusberg (2001) explored the range of language abilities among an 89-study sample of children with autism aged between 4-14 years; 80 boys and 9 girls. A standard battery of language tests was administered to test children's phonological, lexical and higher order semantic and grammatical language abilities. The main findings were that among the children with autism, there was a significant heterogeneity in their language skills, although across all the children, articulation skills were spared.

5. FAMOUSE AUTISTIC PEOPLE

History shows that one out of 10 with autistic people is gifted

in a particular field. Some examples of those gifted autistics are provided by MacKenzie (2008) and cited in Prainsson (2012). Good examples of such people are Lewis Carroll (writer and logician), Charles Darwin (naturalist), Emily Dickinson (poet), Albert Einstein (physicist), Adolf Hitler (politician), Thomas Jefferson (president), James Joyce (author), Michelangelo (artist), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (composer), Isaac Newton (scientist), Moe Norman (golfer), Gorge Orwell (writer), and W. B. Yeats (Poet and dramatist).

The key issue however, is that educators, parents and caregivers should not be frustrated when communication with autistics is seemingly ineffective. What they need to remember that autistics have not only language problem but also difficulties in terms of thinking, remembering and planning, which touch the overall range of classroom activities. Intervention, therefore, is logically needed in order to hone the talents and skills in autistic children but also to help them positively participate in their societies according to their abilities and skills. Finally, it is worth quoting the exact words of Marqueenolia et al., (2014: 8) in this respect “it is vital that we spread awareness of this disorder, particularly among school teachers, so that we can improve outcomes of significant number of children affected [p. 8].”

6. CONCLUSION

Lastly, a word of advice for the educators. Autistic children respond differently to teaching methods. Therefore, teachers are advised to work on developmental skills focusing on “communication” all the time. One point that helps is that the autistic children are language

delayed, thus, activities must be so designed that help these children.

The educators for autistic children must be sensitive to what kind of intervention techniques they employ depending on the kind of disability the child may have. A common example is in one case the teacher may be teaching how to play with different toys, on the other hand s/he would be teaching to another child “just playing.” Therefore, for an effective learning outcome, it is essential that the educator must realize the importance of choosing intervention based on the characteristics related to each individual child’s strengths and weaknesses. .

The special education teachers are also advised to use a simple and concrete language, use non-verbal communication (e.g., gestures and facial expressions, visual aids, repeat instruction, check understanding, link instruction to the pupils’ particular interests and reward positive efforts. In addition, teachers must always avoid the use of figurative language such as sarcasm and idioms or take behaviors personally. Finally, the writer of this article whispers in the ears of teachers to have empathy for their special students in order to enjoy working with them.

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