Exploring Delayed Echolalia in English-Speaking Autistic Boys (Aged 2-5) From Upper-Middle-Class Families in Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Study

K.G. Nadeesha Madumali Ranasinghe

Ministry of Buddhasasana,Religious and Cultural Affairs. nadeemadu32@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) brings countless challenges in communication, social interaction, and behavior, with echolalia emerging as a prominent communication pattern within this population. While echolalia has been extensively studied in Western contexts, there is a notable gap in research focusing on non-Western populations, particularly in countries like Sri Lanka. By narrowing the effort to this demographic, it is considered to research deeply into the refined experiences and expressions of delayed echolalia within a specific cultural and socioeconomic context. Understanding how delayed echolalia displays and functions within this demographic area can provide valuable insights into the communication challenges faced by English-speaking autistic children in Sri Lanka, as well as informing culturally sensitive interventions and support strategies addressed to their unique requirements. Through in-depth interviews and behavioral observations, this study seeks to highlight the triggers, patterns, and advantages and adversities of delayed echolalia, ultimately contributing to a comprehensive understanding of communication dynamics in autism within the Sri Lankan context.

2. Materials and methods

This qualitative study focused on four children aged 2-5 years diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Participants were selected from upper-middle-class families in the Colombo District, where English language is used as the first language of the children. Families were included based on their willingness to participate the study and to share internal information on their children.

To explore delayed echolalia comprehensively, the study has used two primary methods: semi-structured interviews with parents and direct behavioral observations of the children. Observations were conducted in naturalistic settings to minimize external influences and capture authentic communication behaviors. Specific attention was given to gestures, body language, eye contact, and repetitive verbal patterns that occurred independently of conversational prompts.

Semi-structured interviews with parents focused on giving detailed narratives about the children's communication habits, apparent triggers for echolalia, and its impact on daily interactions. Interviews were documented, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes.

Ethical clearance was obtained and informed consent was obtained from all parents before data collection. Though the sample size was small, this supports with the qualitative research objective of gaining deep, contextual insights.

3. Results and Discussion

The study examines the patterns and causes of delayed echolalia in children with autism, emphasizing the importance of understanding their communication practices. Delayed echolalia, involving the repetition of previously heard phrases, can serve various functions such as communication, coping mechanisms, and social interaction.

Triggers identified include routine events, stressful situations, strong emotions, sensory overload, scripted language, associative triggers, and language processing difficulties. These

triggers help children navigate transitions, manage emotions, and engage in social interactions using familiar phrases.

Delayed echolalia aids in expanding vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, and developing language comprehension. However, it can also hinder spontaneous speech development and cause contextual misunderstandings. Children may repeat phrases out of context, limiting their ability to generate original sentences and understand abstract concepts.

Mothers of autistic children view echolalia positively for language learning but acknowledge its challenges. They note that while echolalia helps in vocabulary expansion and communication, it also creates difficulties in spontaneous language generation and appropriate responses.

The study highlights the dual nature of delayed echolalia, presenting both opportunities and challenges in language development. Recognizing and supporting the adaptive functions of echolalia can help caregivers and educators assist autistic children in building effective communication strategies. Encouraging spontaneous speech and contextual language use can enhance their language skills and social interactions.

In conclusion, delayed echolalia has significant potential benefits in aiding language development despite its challenges. Targeted support can help autistic children leverage echolalia towards more effective communication, fostering their ability to engage with and understand their environment. This balanced approach acknowledges both strengths and difficulties associated with delayed echolalia, providing a comprehensive framework for supporting autistic children's communication development.

4. Conclusion

The research highlights the dual role of delayed echolalia in autistic children's language development. While it poses challenges like limiting spontaneous speech and causing contextual misunderstandings, it also offers significant opportunities for language growth. Mothers of autistic children view echolalia positively, noting its benefits in vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation practice, and language comprehension. Children use familiar phrases to interact with language, aiding their communication skills.

However, reliance on repeated phrases can hinder the generation of original sentences and appropriate responses, especially with abstract concepts and complex emotions. Recognizing the adaptive functions of echolalia is crucial. Caregivers and educators should foster environments that encourage spontaneous speech and contextual language use, balancing the strengths and limitations of echolalia. This comprehensive approach enhances autistic children's ability to communicate effectively and understand their surroundings.

5. Key words

Autistic, Communication, Delated, Demographic, Echolalia, Pattern

6. References

- Blackburn, C., Tueres, M., Sandanayake, N., Roberts, J., & Sutherland, R. (2023). A systematic review of interventions for echolalia in autistic children. International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders. https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12931
- Bunning, K., Gona, J. K., Newton, C. R., & Hartley, S. (2014). Caregiver perceptions of students who have complex communication needs following a home-based intervention using augmentative and alternative communication in rural Kenya: An intervention note. Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 30, 344-356. https://doi.org/10.3109/07434618.2014.970294

- Dyer, C., & Hadden, A. J. (1981). Delayed echolalia in autism: Some observations on differences within the term. Child: Care, Health and Development, 7(6), 331–345. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.1981.tb00850.x
- Golysheva, M.D. (2019). A review on echolalia in childhood autism. Available online July 2019. DOI: 10.2991/hssnpp-19.2019.37
- Lovaas, I., Schreibman, L., & Koegel, R. (1974). A behavior modification approach to the treatment of autistic children. Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia, 4(2), 111–129. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02105365
- McConkey, R. (2005). Service delivery in low-income countries. In E. Alant & L. L. Lloyd (Eds.), Augmentative and Alternative Communication and Severe Disabilities (131-154). Philadelphia, PA: Whurr Publishers Ltd.
- Muttiah, N. (2015). Autism spectrum disorders in Sri Lanka: Status quo and future directions. Technical Report. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10649.21607
- Perera, H., Jeewandara, K. C., Seneviratne, S., & Guruge, C. (2016). Outcome of home-based early intervention for autism in Sri Lanka: Follow-up of a cohort and comparison with a non-intervention group. Biomed Research International, 2016, 3284087. https://doi.org/10.1155/2016/3284087
- Perera, H., Wijewardena, K., & Aluthwelage, R. (2009). Screening of 18- to 24-month-old children for autism in a semi-urban community in Sri Lanka. Journal of Tropical Pediatrics, 55, 402-405.
- Prizant, B., Duchan, J. (1981). The functions of immediate echolalia in autistic children. Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders, 46, 241–249.