



Adaptive Storytelling Approach as a Communication Media for Autistic Children at Tunas Bakti Kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often experience difficulties in communication and social interaction. Storytelling has been identified as a potentially effective method to enhance these abilities. **Objective:** This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of an adaptive storytelling approach in improving communication and storytelling skills in children with ASD. **Methods:** This research employed a descriptive qualitative method. The subjects were three children with ASD aged 6–7 years at TK Tunas Bhakti. The storytelling intervention was conducted over four sessions using various media (real fruits, animated videos, and hand puppets). Data were collected through observation, pre- and post-interviews, and documentation. **Results:** The findings showed a significant improvement in storytelling and communication skills among all participants after the three sessions. The children became more enthusiastic, confident, actively engaged, and were better able to retell the stories. **Conclusion:** The adaptive storytelling approach using diverse media proved to be effective in enhancing communication and storytelling abilities in children with ASD. This method also fostered self-confidence and social interaction. Further research is recommended to explore the generalizability of the findings to a larger population.

Keywords: storytelling, autistic children

Introduction

At Tunas Bhakti Kindergarten Semarang, there are several children who exhibit unique ways of interacting and expressing themselves. These differences are not merely ordinary but reflect their distinctive ways of perceiving and responding to the world around them. This is a hallmark of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to Hafidz Muftisany (2023), autism is a neurological developmental condition that affects a person's behavior, social interaction, and communication. Autism is a complex developmental disorder related to communication, social interaction, and imagination activities (Mansur, 2016). The characteristics of autistic children include: (1) qualitative impairments in social interaction, (2) qualitative impairments in communication, and (3) restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior and interests (Apostelina, 2017).

The impacts of ASD are wide-ranging, including difficulties in forming social relationships, limited language abilities, and a high dependence on routines (Yuliana, 2021). Observations conducted on three children aged 6–7 years at Tunas Bhakti Kindergarten revealed difficulties in forming sentences and verbally communicating ideas. Interviews with classroom teachers indicated that these children tend to be passive, show confused expressions, and are unable to respond to questions appropriately.

The phenomenon of children with autism who face communication barriers yet show extraordinary potential is compelling and worthy of research. This interest is reinforced by the fact that simple yet structured interventions such as adaptive storytelling can gradually transform children's communication patterns. This study is relevant as it shows that with the right strategy, children with ASD can develop both socially and verbally.

Previous studies have shown the success of the storytelling method in improving communication skills in autistic children. Ardhiyanti (2017) stated that storytelling using hand puppets increases focus and social interaction. Karnaen & Royanto (2019) found that storytelling improves emotional regulation in kindergarten children. Rika et al. (2023) also confirmed that hand puppets significantly enhance children's speaking abilities. In addition, Azkiya & Iswanti (2016) showed the effectiveness of picture media in supporting expressive communication in autistic children. These studies strengthen the theoretical foundation that adaptive storytelling has a real impact on the language and social development of children with ASD.

The main objective of this study is to examine the extent to which the adaptive storytelling approach can improve communication and storytelling skills in children with ASD. The expected benefits are as a practical guide for teachers and parents in using this method to encourage children's social interaction, expand vocabulary mastery, and foster self-confidence in speaking. Adaptive storytelling also serves as a bridge for children to understand social concepts such as empathy, cooperation, and emotional expression through narratives tailored to their needs and interests.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive method with a qualitative approach, where the data collected consisted of descriptions of facts or phenomena that were the focus of the research. Creswell (in Murdiyanto, 2020) defines qualitative research as a process of

investigating social phenomena and human problems. According to Sudaryanto (2015:15), qualitative methods are described as research methods conducted based on facts or phenomena in the field, which are empirically present in the speakers' lives, so the data obtained and recorded by the researcher are raw and in accordance with what is observed in the field. This research used a qualitative type because it aimed to describe in depth how storytelling can function as a communication medium for children with autism.

The data sources in this study were obtained directly from the research subjects, as well as from interview and documentation results. The research was conducted at Tunas Bhakti Kindergarten, with the subjects being three children aged 6–7 years who experience autism spectrum disorder. Data collection was carried out through observation, pre- and post-interviews, and documentation. The research involved delivering storytelling interventions over four sessions.

The collected data in this study were then analyzed using matching (*padan*) and distributional (*agih*) methods. According to Sudaryanto (in Mahsun, 2014:120), the matching method is a technique used to determine the identity of a linguistic unit by using non-linguistic elements as determining tools, which are not part of the language form itself. Meanwhile, the distributional method (Sudaryanto in Mahsun, 2014:117) is used in data analysis by employing parts of the language as the determining tools. In this research, the matching method was applied by observing communication patterns such as facial expressions, body movements, and children's responses to stories. The distributional method focused on analyzing linguistic elements such as word or sentence order in the children's speech.

Findings and Discussion

This study was specifically conducted at Tunas Bhakti Kindergarten, with the main focus on improving the communication skills of autistic children through an adaptive storytelling approach. According to Christin et al. (2021), storytelling is the process by which individuals share stories through various media such as words, images, or sound. Storytelling can also illustrate relationships and define boundaries in interactions with others. Prior to implementing storytelling activities, pre-intervention interviews with teachers indicated that children's communication and social interaction skills were still lacking, highlighting the need for a method that could enhance these abilities, such as storytelling. Therefore, the storytelling approach used in this study was designed to be flexibly tailored to each child's individual needs, making the learning process easier and more effective for them.

1. Initial Condition of Communication and Social Interaction Skills in Autistic Children

Based on the results of pre-storytelling interviews with informant 1, it was found that the children's communication skills were still limited, particularly in organizing ideas coherently and understanding questions. Their social interactions were also underdeveloped, as evidenced by their difficulties in engaging with teachers and peers. The children often displayed emotional unpreparedness or unstable moods, which affected their readiness to participate in learning activities. This highlights the need for a

learning method that not only teaches communication but also takes into account the psychological and emotional conditions of the children.



Image 1. Initial condition before storytelling

2. Importance of Adapting Stories to Children's Special Interests

According to informant 1, teachers at Tunas Bhakti Kindergarten must consider the emotional condition and readiness of autistic children before implementing the storytelling method. Teachers need to select stories that align with the children's special interests, such as the story "A Good Friend" or the animated video "Nusa and Rara," which teaches politeness. These help children stay focused and engaged. Matching stories with the children's favorite characters also helps create a positive mood, enhancing their ability to receive information and interact socially.

3. Preparation and Adjustment of Storytelling Duration

This was also emphasized by informant 2, who stated that the storytelling method requires sufficient time and a conducive atmosphere to ensure that the children are fully engaged in the learning process. Therefore, thorough preparation by teachers is essential. This preparation includes selecting interesting and relevant story topics based on the children's needs and interests, as well as adjusting the appropriate duration for each storytelling session. Considering that autistic children typically have shorter attention spans, storytelling sessions should be divided into several short segments or combined with varied activities so that children do not quickly lose focus or become bored. Teachers must also be sensitive and flexible in adjusting the story duration or activities if they observe signs that children are losing focus, becoming restless, or showing discomfort.

4. Improvement in Communication and Social Interaction Skills of Autistic Children

Based on post-storytelling interviews with informant 1, it was found that children were very enthusiastic, able to follow the stories well, and expressed themselves vividly. The use of intonation, facial expressions, and supporting media such as pictures and props helped with comprehension and attracted the students' attention. Some children who were initially less confident began to participate actively. Teachers emphasized the importance of managing storytelling duration to maintain children's focus. Overall, storytelling proved to be effective in increasing learning interest and communication skills, and teachers are committed to further developing this method to make it more engaging and interactive.

Session 1

We began the session by introducing ourselves and getting to know the students. We had a light conversation about what they had for breakfast that morning to create a comfortable atmosphere. We also asked them about their after-school activities to build

▪ closeness. The children sat in a circle. We introduced the fruits using picture cards and asked each child to guess the name of the fruit on the card. In addition to the cards, we also brought real fruits—bananas, oranges, and apples—which we showed one by one while saying their names and colors.

We began telling the story “A Good Friend,” featuring fruits as the main characters, using expressive facial gestures and interesting voice intonations. We named the banana character Pino, the orange character Jeri, and the apple character Aci. During the storytelling, we lifted and displayed each fruit as the character was mentioned. The children were invited to guess the fruit or mention the character's name during the story to encourage participation. After the story ended, the children were asked to retell parts of the story they remembered, taking turns. They were also given the opportunity to hold the fruits and mention the role each fruit played in the story.

Session 2

We began the activity by singing a children's song and casually chatting about a friend who was absent in the previous session due to illness. Afterward, the children were invited to sit in front of the screen to watch a short animated video titled “Help and Thank You” featuring Nusa and Rara. After the video, we retold the story using storytelling techniques—mimicking the characters' voices and expressing the emotions conveyed in the story.

We asked simple questions such as who the main characters were, what happened in the story, and how the story ended. The children were given the opportunity to retell the story, either individually or together as a group. Every attempt they made to tell the story or answer a question was appreciated with verbal praise.

Session 3

In the following session, the friend who had been absent due to illness had returned to school. We played another animated video with a different story. Before starting, we encouraged the children to express empathy by asking how their friend was feeling and checking on their condition. We also asked an opening question such as, “Do you have any pets at home?” The children then began sharing stories about their pets, and one of them mentioned that he had a cow that would be sold for the Eid al-Adha celebration.

Next, the children were invited to watch a video titled “The Kind-Hearted Turtle” in a calm atmosphere. We sat together with the children and read the story aloud from the video. After that, we retold the story using an expressive storytelling style without video support—just using pictures and simple hand gestures. Then, the children were asked one by one to retell the parts of the story they remembered and to mention the moral values that could be applied in their daily life at home.

Session 4

We began the activity by introducing the hand puppets one by one while greeting the children using each puppet's unique voice. The story we presented had a family theme titled “The Importance of Sharing”, with the hand puppets as the main characters. During the storytelling, we varied our vocal intonations and showed a range of emotional expressions—such as happiness, sadness, and anger—to make the children more engaged and interested.

The children were also directly involved in the story, for example by responding to the puppets' greetings or answering questions posed by the characters. After the story

ended, we invited the children to take turns retelling the story using the hand puppets as a supporting medium. They were also given the opportunity to share personal experiences related to sharing, using the puppets as tools to express their feelings. The activity ended with a light game using the puppets, as well as words of appreciation from us for the children's participation and courage in storytelling.

This study explores the effectiveness of an adaptive storytelling approach as a communication intervention tool for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The research shows significant progress in verbal communication, social interaction, and confidence in expressing ideas after the children were given storytelling stimulation through three sessions using various media. The findings confirm that a contextual and personalized approach—such as adaptive storytelling—not only functions as an educational tool but also as an integrated linguistic and affective therapeutic medium.

The study identified three main conditions related to the communication and social interaction abilities of autistic children. First, the children had short attention spans and were easily distracted by strong sensory stimuli. Observations showed that some children still had difficulty organizing and conveying stories in sequence. Their confused facial expressions indicated difficulty focusing, and some would respond randomly if they did not understand the questions. Since real fruits were used as media, children tended to be more interested in eating them. As a result, the researchers reflected on this and applied improvement strategies in the following sessions, such as increasing interaction between teacher and student and replacing the storytelling media.

The use of concrete media like real fruits in storytelling for autistic children created strong sensory engagement but also risked reducing narrative focus. This finding supports the theory that children with ASD are more easily distracted by highly stimulating objects (Sambak et al., 2021). Therefore, the selection of media should strike a balance between sensory stimulation and narrative attention to ensure optimal communication outcomes.



Image 2. Storytelling using real fruit media

The second condition before storytelling was that the children gave minimal communicative responses (rarely responding when spoken to). After receiving storytelling using animated videos, the children's condition showed improvement in attention span, narrative comprehension, and willingness to respond. The children were consistently enthusiastic when seeing animal characters in the videos, and when the story was retold using expressive storytelling, they added their own details with joyful expressions and elevated tone of voice. The children began using intonation and facial expressions appropriate to the story, indicating better emotional processing.

Familiar animated video media proved effective in strengthening emotional connection and narrative memory. The simultaneous visual and auditory engagement

▪increased attention and verbal abilities. This study supports the multisensory approach in special needs learning, as proposed by Nurelah & Nuraeni (2024), who noted that audio-visual combinations enhance receptive and expressive language structures in children with autism.



Image 3. Storytelling using Nusa and Rara animated video



Image 4. Storytelling using “The Kind-Hearted Turtle” animated video

The third condition observed was a gap between receptive (understanding) and expressive (speaking) language abilities. We used hand puppet media with family-themed stories about sharing. The learning approach became more effective by increasing student engagement in discussion and providing easy-to-understand concrete examples. The findings of this study showed a significant improvement in children's storytelling skills. The children were able to structure sentences more coherently, gained confidence to speak in front of others, and developed two-way communication. The children also began to show initiative in creating story variations.

The use of hand puppet media in storytelling also proved effective in building active communication skills, emotional expression, and narrative initiative. Storytelling activities using puppets not only strengthened language communication skills but also social-emotional aspects. This study demonstrates that role-based storytelling approaches can enhance children's capacity to understand social roles, structure narratives, and participate both verbally and emotionally in social interactions. This aligns with Wati et al. (2020), who stated that storytelling using hand puppet visualization impacts the speaking communication skills of autistic children because it is one of the methods that teaches discipline in listening through engaging puppet storytelling.



Image 5. Students showing expressive responses



Image 6. Storytelling using hand puppets

A statement from informant 1 noted that “the storytelling method made the children more enthusiastic, focused, and brave enough to participate by asking questions and retelling stories. The children were able to follow the storyline and show lively expressions, which helped improve their speaking skills.” Moving forward, storytelling duration will be adjusted to keep the children focused and prevent boredom. Overall, storytelling has proven effective in increasing learning interest and communication, and the informant is committed to developing this method to make it more engaging and interactive.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the idea that learning approaches should be adaptive, especially in the context of educating children with special needs. Each session demonstrated the importance of adjusting content, media, and emotional engagement strategies to help children access the material optimally. Adaptive storytelling meets these needs by integrating affective, linguistic, cognitive, and social elements. Tailoring stories to the children's interests significantly improved active participation because the children felt emotionally connected to the material. This adaptive process distinguishes adaptive storytelling from ordinary storytelling, as its success is not only measured by the ability to deliver stories but also by its capacity to shape children's language structures, enhance verbal confidence, and support social-emotional development.

Conclusion

From the results of this study, it can be concluded that the adaptive storytelling approach is effective in improving the communication and storytelling skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at Tunas Bhakti Kindergarten. The implementation of storytelling that is tailored to the psychological conditions, special interests, and sensory characteristics of the children had a significantly positive impact on their language development, social interaction, and confidence in verbally expressing ideas.

This approach not only enhanced the quality of the children's communication but also supported the development of more structured narrative abilities, speaking confidence, and the capacity to understand emotions and social roles. Therefore, adaptive

- storytelling is not only relevant in the learning context but also holds potential as part of a sustainable linguistic and psychosocial intervention strategy in inclusive education. Hence, this study recommends that adaptive storytelling be considered as an alternative communication strategy in early childhood education institutions, especially those offering inclusive education services.

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