

## Using Story telling Technique in Developing Language in Children with Autism in Nigeria: Perceptions and challenges

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### Abstract

This study investigated the use of computer storytelling technique in developing language in children with autism in special schools in Enugu State – Nigeria from the teachers' perspectives and challenges facing the teachers. To achieve the aims of the study, the researchers conducted a survey consisting three research questions structured into questionnaire format to elicit valid data from the teachers' perceptions and challenges. The sample of the study was 60 teachers who teach children with autism in the two special schools in Enugu State. To collect data from the respondents, questionnaires were given to teachers inquiring about their perceptions and challenges as well as teachers experience. The data collected from the teachers were analyzed through the use of mean and standard deviation. The findings of the study showed that teachers saw the use of computer storytelling in developing language to children with autism very needful, and as a technique that makes the children relax, calm and concentrated in the class and learn language as others. However, about 70 percent of teachers found the use of computer storytelling technique as a serious challenge to apply due to a lot of time it consumes and noise it generates. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommend that the Ministry of Education, Colleges of Education and Universities should train both in serving teachers and teacher trainees on the use of computer storytelling technique in developing language because of its importance in getting children with autism not only to develop language but helps to create attention in the class which in a long run can improve their listening skills and speech development.

**Keywords:** Language, computer storytelling, autism, children with autism.

### INTRODUCTION

The predominance of language and its importance to mental, psychological and social functions of every individual has brought about paramount impact for social skills. Nowadays, social skill is an important skill that every learner and most people need to know. People use language for different purposes, from exchange of information to interaction but not many people can enjoy these benefits. Unfortunately some people experience many language related difficulties at home and in schools and as a result, there is a high children learning failures /rates due to communication gap (Rattanavich, 2015, Smith; Polloway; Patton & Dowdy, 2004).

In general, the traditional approaches to teaching language to children including children with autism in Nigeria have not been successful because language contains small elements that are broken down and taught in a fragmented manner. This approach was based on the theoretical assumption that all children especially children with autism (CWA) must learn all these language elements in isolation before they can put the elements together to create coherent language. However, such learning theory divorces language from the consideration of purpose and meaning (Christie, 2012).

The literature evidence has revealed that the use of computer storytelling technique (STT) could develop language in children especially those with autism. Story is the way people communicate their experiences and understand others experiences and the way their imaginations are liberated, make sense of the word and their own position within it (Keshta, 2013). Stories engage ones thinking, emotions, and can even lead to the creation of mental imagery and in addition have power to delight, enchant, touch, teach, inspire, motivate, challenge and imprint a good picture in the children's minds (Green & Brock, 2000; Litherland, 2015). Computer stories serve multiple purposes in the classroom including sparking children's' interests and building rapport and attention and increasing their vocabulary, understand parts of language, and learn the rules of English (Green, 2004; Craig; Hull; Haggart & Crowder, 2001). In addition, stories tend to have more depth than a simple narration of events (Keshta, 2013).

In the past, boys and girls love interesting stories. They looked forward eagerly to evenings when in the lovely moonlight, they joined their parents and elders in telling beautiful stories of their ancestors and interesting folk-core. The children often tell and retell such stories the following day until the evening brought them together again to learn more stories, keeping them out of their beds long after they should have been asleep. This is because the children's appetite for stories is a reflection of the basic human needs to understand patterns of life not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a personal and emotional existence (Smith, 2017). Such is the delight children drive from storytelling which in a long run can help them in developing functional speech.

Story telling is the way of providing information about children's ancestors through the use of computer. Besides providing familiar information, storytelling denotes how new things that are well known to the children are introduced and as well as the most powerful way to put ideas into the world

today (Keshta, 2013; Mckee, 2015). This appreciation of known familiar things has effects on multiple dimensions in the lives of children such as making friends, making success, and in their language development. Telling stories about themselves, their families, friends and colleagues, communities, cultures and their place in history reveal important events to children (McDrury & Alterio, 2003). It is possible that telling stories in this way can help the children to develop language because telling stories involves the use of speech. In addition, storytelling instills virtues in children, makes them aware of their own culture and roots, enhances their vocabulary proficiencies, improves their listening skills, encourages creativity and imagination power in the children and improves their writing skills, and creative expression (Shah, 2017; Barr & Campbell, 2007).

Often times, certain concepts, ideas or topic may seem very difficult to explain to children, the teachers can integrate the concepts, ideas or topic into stories to vividly explain them. Story telling is a knowledge management technique, a way of distributing information targeted to audience, and a sense of information, forms a crucial part in developing children overall personality, help the children to retain more knowledge and settle down to listen and demonstrate to children how grammar and in particular way the tenses are used (Barzaq, 2009; Liu, 2016; Shah, 2017). Story telling provides natural connection between events and concepts, and a way of telling stories through images. It is often conceptualized as a getaway of encouraging young learners of English language to be actively participating in the process of learning foreign language (Keshta, 2013).

It is a linguistic activity that is educative because it allows the learners to share their personal understanding with other learners (Egan, 1995). One would assume that when children with autism (CWA) are able to listen and retell the stories heard, they are likely going to incorporate it into their oral language repertoire (Smith et al, 2004). This structure allows the CWA to retell stories they have heard especially stories from their own experiences, and to write them down and illustrate them in their oral presentation (Mackamey, 1991). Story telling also allows CWA who have had negative language experiences to begin to succeed, to link written and spoken language, and to grow as communicators (Smith et al, 2004). Storytelling stirs emotion not to be manipulative, not simply for melodramatic effect, but to break through the white noise of information that continuously inundates us and to deliver the message (Smith, 2017). This is because human beings including children are not inclined to think about things they do not care about but the ones that concern them.

Children with autism (CWA) have long life developmental disability that affects how they communicate and relate to others and how they experience the world. (National Autistic Society [NAS], 2017). These children display a range of condition characterized by challenges of social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and non-verbal communication. The National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders (NIDCD, 2010) noted that children with autism find it difficult to understand and relate to people, take part in everyday family life, school work and social life, and difficulty in communicating their needs. Children who have

these characteristics may find it difficult to develop language and use speech as many of them may have little or no functional speech throughout their lives.

Research studies have shown that while 50% of the children with autism do not develop spoken language, others may begin speaking or may not learn to speak at all, still others may learn to produce words and sentences but find it difficult using them to communicate effectively (Paul, 2008, Eta, 2017). What these studies imply is that there is the need to teach CWA how to use language for interaction. In addition studies (e.g. Prizant & Wetherby, 2005, Koegel & Koegel, 2009; Brown, 2013 & Keshta, 2013) have shown that CWA have delay in developing speech and language. Furthermore, research evidence showed that an estimated 47% of CWA reported delay in social interaction and communication due to language (Dunn & Leitschuh, 2006). Vandereikcken, Hoogduin & Emmelkamp (2008) in their studies revealed that CWA are likely to have limited ability to take note of and understand, the feelings, plans and intention of others due to lack of communication. In the same vein, Pan, Tsai & Chu, (2009) and Emck, Bosscher, Van-weiringen, Doreleijers and Beek (2011) in their studies revealed that inability to develop verbal skills by CWA resulted in them being mute. In the context of this study, providing effective intervention to enhance the communication skill and language is required to improve on the speech and language development of CWA. Eta (2017) who used concentrated language encounter on CWA revealed an improved speech and word phonology.

Previous studies have revealed that storytelling would have similar effect on speech and language development of children with autism (CWA). Studies such as Reiley (2007); King (2007); Poveda and Cuevas (2008) and Commeyras and Hu (2008) have shown that the use of storytelling helped in increasing the language skills of children. Furthermore studies also revealed that storytelling increases the reading, writing and speaking and listening skills of children. It creates authentic worlds in the classroom (Barzaq, 2009; Lin, 2010 and Hentihu, 2010). For instance Lin (2010) using storytelling in enhancing English comprehension on a population of 126 Chinese students revealed that retelling stories significantly improved the students text comprehension at the level of overall meaning, helped them to learn general concepts during reading and to retain a synopsis of the story in their memory after reading.

The problem of this study is that no data known to the researchers exist in Enugu and indeed Nigeria on the use of storytelling technique by special educators in developing language in CWA. The present study investigated whether the use of computer storytelling technique (CSTT) would improve the language development of CWA in Enugu. In this regard, the aim of the study was to investigate the perceptions of using CSTT by special educators in two special schools in Enugu and the challenges facing the special educators. The study also investigated whether differences in the perceptions and challenges affect male and female teachers. Thus, the following research questions were raised to address the problems of this study.

- 1) What are the perceptions of special educators in using CSTT to develop language for CWA in Enugu?

- 2) What are the challenges facing special educators in using CSTT?
- 3) Is there any difference in male and female special educators in using the technique?

### Research Variables

- a) Independent variables – gender, areas of specialization and experience.
- b) Dependent variables – using computer storytelling technique, special educators’ perceptions and challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

### Ethical Approval

The researchers obtained approval from Enugu State Ministry of Education and also from the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria Nsukka, and Enugu State to conduct this study strictly for academic purpose and as part of their children with special needs experience.

### Design

The descriptive survey research design was employed to guide the study. Brown and Bodgers (2002) describe a descriptive research designs as a research that describes a group of characteristics in numerical order. In this study, the researchers used qualitative data that was collected from questionnaires given to teachers.

### The population

The population of the study consisted of all the 5 special educators and 55 teachers who were teachers in special education centers in Abakpa and Orji River all in Enugu State – Nigeria during the first term of the scholastic year (2016-2017). Those teachers who did not study special education were included in the population because of their long standing experiences in the field. For the purpose of this study they are all called special educators.

The sample of the study was 60 special educators who were randomly chosen by a simple random sample from the two special education centers in Enugu State. Tables (1, 2, 3, and 4) indicate the distribution of sample according to gender, areas of specialization and institutions.

**Table 1: The distribution of sample according to gender**

Gender	Number	Percent (%)
Male	27	45%
Female	33	55 _____
<b>Total</b>	<b>60 _____</b>	<b>100 _____</b>

**Table 2: The distribution of the sample according to areas of specialization**

<u>Areas</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent (%)</u>
B.Ed Special education	5	8.33
B.Ed English	12	20
N.C.E Social Studies	25	41.67
N.C.E Religion	10	16.67
N.C.E. Mathematics	8	13.33
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60 ____</b>	<b>100 __</b>

**Table 3: The distribution of sample according to years of experience**

Years of Experience	Number	Percent (%)
1-5 years	25	41.67
5-10 years	30	50
10- 15 and above	5	8.33
<b>TOTAL _____</b>	<b>60 _____</b>	<b>100 __</b>

**Table 4: The distribution of the sample according to institutions**

Schools	Number	Percentage (%)
Special school, Abakpa (SSA)	30	50
Special school Orji (SSO)	30	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

**The Instrument for Data Collection:**

The researchers used questionnaires and interviewed the special educators in investigating their perceptions of using CSTT and challenges facing them. The researchers used the questionnaires to collect information from the teachers because questionnaires help to obtain valid data that are not possible in spoken form as the teachers are more willing to write on paper than speak. The interviews were used to collect data from the teachers on their areas of specialization and experiences. Both the questionnaires and interviews format were open ended and presented to them which they responded to.

**Validity and Reliability of the Instrument:**

The instrument has not been used before; the researchers tested it through a pilot study on special educators outside the study area to check its reliability. Twenty special educators were used for the pilot study. In their responses, it was discovered that some of the research questions were not open ended, too long and somehow boring. To this regard, the researchers, therefore, reframed the questionnaires and interview questions to be actually open ended and modified some of them so that the estimated time for the questionnaires and interviews became reasonable enough. In addition, some of the questionnaires and interviews were deleted so that the estimated interviews and questionnaire items became 20 in all.

For the reliability of the instruments it was proved valid through referee validity report as three member panel or referees checked the relevance of the instrument, and then the researchers modified the questionnaires according to the referee report.

In developing the questionnaires, the researchers read through different previous studies related to the present study. Then, the initial draft was produced and was given to a panel of referees to ensure referee validity. Thereafter, the

questionnaires were modified as specified by the referees' comments. This was followed by the administration of the questionnaires on the pilot sample. Finally, the questionnaires were administered on the actual sample of the study.

**Method of Data Collection**

Administering the questionnaires on the sample of the study was not easy one as special educators in both schools were busy performing their daily duties in their various schools. The researchers greeted the teachers and thanked them for participating. Then, the researchers explained the aims of the study and its significances. The questionnaires were written in English Language and were given to teachers to fill during the brake period. The conducts of the study lasted for 20 to 40 minutes and were returned on the spot after filling the questionnaires. The interviews were also conducted in the same manner.

**Method of Data Analysis**

The data collected from the respondents were answered using mean and standard deviation according to the research questions that guided the study.

**RESULTS**

Table 1: shows the mean scores of males and females on perception. As seen in schools, both male and females special educators in both schools had similar mean scores. All responses of all special educators relating to their gender and institutions were different.

This means that both teachers have little knowledge about the use of CSTT. In the first study question: What are the perceptions of special educators on the use of storytelling technique in developing language in children with autism?

**Table 5:** Mean and standard deviation on perception of S.E

PERCEPTION	Variable SSA				SSO			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
Story telling helps CWA to:								
1) Enrich their vocabularies	2.83	0.58	2.96	0.78	2.90	0.53	2.55	0.57
2) Convey their actions through words	2.87	0.57	2.91	0.48	2.98	0.54	2.96	0.41
3) Gain verbal skills	2.68	0.58	2.83	0.58	2.92	0.76	2.64	0.62
4) Develop speech in a simple way	3.43	0.54	2.75	0.61	2.99	0.56	2.55	0.72
5) Acquire new words to express ideas	2.91	0.48	2.94	0.94	2.83	0.58	2.82	0.80
6) Enhance their listening skills	2.80	0.59	2.73	0.91	2.72	0.95	2.65	0.95
7) Heighten their ability to communicate	2.63	0.63	2.57	0.97	2.56	1.01	2.91	0.48
8) Construct their own sentences	3.05	0.48	3.25	0.85	2.69	1.03	2.60	0.81
9) Talk a lot that may lead to language development	2.83	0.52	2.85	0.77	2.98	0.54	2.59	0.55
10) Participate actively in oral Presentation in the class	2.81	0.64	2.88	0.68	2.60	0.81	2.73	0.94

The result in Table 5 shows the mean responses of special educators on perceptions of the use of storytelling ranged from 2.55 to 3.25. This shows that all the items were above the cutoff point of 2.50 indicating that all the respondents in both schools agreed that the use of storytelling would help in developing language in children with autism in Enugu State.

Similarly the standard deviation of each item from the mean ranged from 0.41- 1.03, showing that the respondents were not too far from the mean and from one another in their responses. Gender difference was not significant. This gives credence to the validity of the mean.

**The second study question:**

What is the challenges special educators face in using storytelling techniques?

**Table 6:** Mean and standard deviation on challenges

Challenges	Variable CD				SSO			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
<b>The challenges of the use of CSTT is that:</b>								
1) It does not Carter for the individual difference	3.47	0.52	3.34	0.48	3.69	0.55	3.41	0.60
2) It generates noise								
3) There may be lack of computers	3.41	0.60	3.65	0.61	3.45	0.47	3.42	0.44
4) It cannot be used with all the levels of the children	3.53	0.62	3.50	0.63	3.46	0.46	3.28	0.41
5) It may neglect the weaker ones	3.66	0.89	3.20	0.45	3.34	0.89	3.30	1.14
6) It requires a lot of time to use	3.05	0.88	3.27	1.21	3.48	0.88	3.05	0.92
7) There may be grammatical errors	3.14	1.40	3.24	0.91	3.44	0.81	3.28	1.07
8) The culture of the children may cause troubles	3.38	1.08	3.38	0.89	3.40	1.08	3.45	0.92
9) It is very difficult to use	3.39	1.03	3.46	0.92	3.02	0.99	3.06	0.89
10) Managing the class room may be difficult	3.25	0.97	3.44	1.13	3.16	1.12	3.27	1.21

The results in Table 6 indicate that all the respondents agreed that the use of storytelling in developing language in children with autism was very challenging. From the results, the mean responses of special educators on challenges facing them ranged from 3.02 – 3.69. This shows that all the ten items were above the cutoff point of 2.50 in both schools. The gender difference was not significant as both genders in both schools experienced the same challenges. Later the researchers interviewed 60 special educators to explore their experiences on the use of storytelling technique. The interviews showed that the response of special educators were the same according to their years of experiences. Their responses ranged from using the storytelling technique sometimes to rarely use. Then concerning their challenges, their responses also ranged from being noisy to time consuming. There was no gender difference in their responses in both schools. In regard to third study questions concerning whether there will be gender difference, it was revealed that there was no significant difference. All genders were equally affected in both schools as indicated in Tables 5 and 6.

## DISCUSSION

After analyzing all the responses of special educators, regarding to their gender specialization, experience, institution and areas of specialization, we found out that their responses were the same and that means they know the important of the use of storytelling in developing language in children with autism. Concerning the first study question, what are the perceptions of special educators in the use CSTT in developing language in CWA?" it was clear that the use of CSTT would help in developing language in CWA. This agrees with the findings of Lin (2010) and Hentihu (2010) that the use of storytelling technique helped in developing language in the children.

Regarding the second study question, what are the challenges of using CSTT in developing language in CWA? It was revealed that all the respondents in both schools experienced the same deficiency. This agrees with finding of Keshta (2013) that teachers face serious challenges in using the technique. Their challenges ranged from being noise, time consuming to lack of related language materials. This may be attributed to inadequate training and inexperience in the use of CSTT. Then concerning the third study question on gender difference. It was revealed that there was no significant difference of both genders.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, both special educators in both schools saw the use of storytelling in developing language in children with autism in Enugu State and the Nigeria as a technique that worth to be included in the curriculum. However, the use of CSTT posed serious challenges to special educators due to inexperience emanated from lack of training and knowledge.

## Limitations and Implications

The first limitation is the difficulty experienced in finding out special educators in deaf education to form a sample representative. Given that the sample size was small and by present standard the respondents cannot be considered representative of the special educators' population at large. Secondly, only two special schools in the current study were used. Possibly, when more special schools are used, a different result might be found.

Thirdly, the academic environment from which the sample was drawn also cannot be considered representative and may not be fully generalized. In addition getting permission from the head teachers of the two special schools used for the study was very difficult as the schools are located very far from each other. This resulted in starting the conduct of the study later than scheduled.

## Implications for further research

Further research should be directed to several issues left unresolved by the current study. Our results show the significance of CSTT in developing language skills for interaction. Children with autism need language to function in the hearing world. Our findings show that the use of storytelling is the avenue to follow for future since this can help bring up a new generation of children with autism who are able to enjoy a good quality of life and make contributions to the society at large. Second, future studies should attempt to tease apart the joint effects of children with autism and other children to better understand why children with autism appear to have language problems.

Another important line of future research would address the consequences of language barriers for other important outcomes such as academic achievement as language is very important for good academic outcomes. Future studies should also be conducted with large and more diverse special educators. This is because our findings cannot be generalized to special educators in Nigeria. Continuing research is needed to explore the nature of these differentiated needs in the interest of helping of all children with autism develop healthy communication and interact with others, and feel good about themselves.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend curriculum developers or designers to provide Nigeria curriculum with different stories that enhance many skills of language development in all children. In addition, the researchers also recommend the curriculum developers to redo the Nigerian curricula and expand the listening materials to include the use of computer storytelling, and to prepare and organize sensitization workshops to update the teachers' knowledge on the need to use storytelling technique in developing language not only in children with autism but other children at large.

The special educators are recommended to borrow a leaf from modern technique of teaching language such as the use of

computer storytelling because of its importance in creating a quiet and calm learning environment.

The Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria should conduct further research studies to determine the effectiveness of computer storytelling technique to solve other children with speech and communication problems in Nigeria. The Education Ministry should also conduct further research studies to determine the strategies and techniques employed by special educators to teach language in special schools in Enugu state – Nigeria. There is the need to retrain the serving teachers in special education to be fully acquainted with the skills involved in teaching children with special needs.

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