



## Learning Strategies and Communication Styles at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi: Educational Communication for Students with Autism

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on educational communication in the context of SLB Autisma YPPA Bukittinggi, specifically on teaching strategies and communication styles between teachers and autistic students. The research method involves interviews with the Head of the Special Needs School and an analysis of teaching practices in both classical and therapy classes. The research findings indicate that communication between teachers and autistic students relies on understanding varied communication styles. The therapy class, using the ABA approach, emphasizes individuality and personalized learning. Communication styles in the therapy class are dominated by teachers, who utilize repetition, emphasis, and motivation to achieve learning objectives. Learning strategies that comprehend the uniqueness of each student and utilize cognitive learning theories can aid in achieving optimal learning outcomes.

Keywords: Communication Style, Education Communication, Special Needs School.

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## INTRODUCTION

Individuals with autism often face significant communication challenges, which result in barriers to their daily interactions. Teachers at Special Needs Schools (SLB) require specialized and directed communication strategies to overcome these barriers, enabling them to achieve the learning objectives set forth in the inclusive education curriculum. Unaddressed communication barriers can lead to difficulties for autistic students in comprehending lesson materials and deriving the maximum benefit from the education provided.

Communication limitations experienced by autistic children can result in obstacles when interacting with non-autistic individuals, such as misunderstandings, language difficulties, emotional disturbances, and sensory integration issues. Moreover, these communication barriers create challenges in self-expression for individuals with autism, necessitating specific communication approaches to address these issues. Autism is a condition characterized by developmental disorders in children, affecting neurological development and impacting language, behavior, and communication abilities. The behaviors of autistic children differ from those of typically developing children, encompassing excessive behaviors, lack of behavior, or even disengagement.

Unfortunately, negative stigma towards autistic children remains widespread in social life, particularly concerning societal assumptions about the perceived inadequacy of their educational quality. Educational communication, especially between teachers and students, plays a crucial role in achieving optimal learning outcomes for these students. Both therapy and learning processes inherently involve communication between teachers and students. Educational communication conducted between teachers and students is a key factor in achieving the learning objectives. This communication typically occurs during the learning process.

SLB Autisma YPPA Bukittinggi is a special needs educational institution that focuses on tailored learning achievements adapted to the conditions experienced by autistic students. According to an interview with the School Principal, Nurhidayah S.Pd, the learning approach has been simplified yet remains aligned with the national special education curriculum. At SLB Autisma YPPA Bukittinggi, there are 58 autistic students, the majority of whom are male. The learning process is divided into classical classes, where one teacher instructs 10-15 students, and therapy classes, where one teacher assists students with special needs. Different learning strategies are employed in these two types of classes.

Educational communication is a practical and applied field that leverages communication theory to enhance the quality of education, address learning challenges, and provide solutions within the educational process (Nofrion, 2016). It plays a critical role in improving both the efficiency and effectiveness of learning by facilitating clear and effective exchanges between educators and learners. Moreover, educational communication is instrumental in addressing emerging issues within the educational environment, such as student boredom or disengagement. Through targeted communication strategies, educators can identify and resolve these issues, thereby fostering a more engaging and productive learning experience. In educational practice, the role of communication extends beyond merely facilitating cognitive learning. It encompasses the holistic development of students, including their attitudes and skills. This multifaceted role underscores the significance of educational communication in achieving comprehensive educational objectives. Therefore, it is

imperative for all stakeholders, particularly educational practitioners, to appreciate and utilize educational communication as a bridge connecting various fields of study and enhancing the overall educational experience.

This research employs cognitive learning theory, which posits that learning is a cognitive process occurring within the human mind. Cognitive learning involves mental activities and interactions with the environment, leading to changes in understanding, knowledge, behaviors, skills, and attitudes. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, learning is an effort to comprehend new information by integrating it with existing cognitive structures. This process is actively undertaken by students, who engage in activities such as seeking experiences, gathering information, solving problems, observing their environment, and demonstrating understanding to achieve specific goals. Prior knowledge acquisition plays a pivotal role in the success of comprehending new information (Muhaimin, 2012). This underscores the importance of building on existing knowledge frameworks to facilitate deeper understanding and retention of new concepts. Cognitive learning theory, therefore, asserts that effective learning involves the integration of new knowledge into pre-existing cognitive structures, enhancing the learner's ability to apply this knowledge in various contexts.

Cognitivism theory, with its focus on the complexity of the learning process, maintains that effective learning activities should align with established learning objectives. This theory is particularly relevant in analyzing the learning processes at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi, where teachers function as educational communicators. They are required to employ sophisticated learning strategies to maximize the attainment of learning outcomes for autistic students.

This research utilizes Robert M. Gagne's (1977) instructional design framework to analyze the interaction between teachers and autistic students at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi. Gagne's framework emphasizes a systematic approach to instructional design, which includes identifying learning outcomes, sequencing instructional events, and providing feedback. By applying this framework, the research aims to understand how teachers can effectively communicate and engage with autistic students to facilitate optimal learning experiences.

The unique needs of autistic students necessitate tailored instructional strategies that account for their specific communication and learning challenges. By examining the educational communication strategies employed at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi, this research seeks to provide insights into how cognitive learning theory can be effectively applied to support the educational development of autistic students. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader field of educational communication by highlighting best practices and offering recommendations for educators working with special needs populations.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research method employed in this study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research involves studying individuals or groups by attentively listening to their narratives and experiences from the subjects' perspectives. This approach is particularly effective in capturing the essence and intrinsic value of specific objects or phenomena (Abdussamad, 2021).

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research methodology, where the data collected predominantly comprises words or images rather than numerical data. The emphasis is placed on understanding the process rather than merely the product. Descriptive qualitative research aims to depict specific events or objects based on factual observations gathered in the field.

In the context of this study, the researcher examines the challenges faced by the Special Needs School (SLB) Autism YPPA Bukittinggi, where certain educational achievements have not been fully realized. The study highlights the importance of communication as a potential solution to these

issues, particularly focusing on the communication strategies employed by educators, especially SLB teachers.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Understanding the Teacher-Student Communication Styles of Individuals with Autism: An Individual Approach at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi**

The communication between teachers and students with autism at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi demands an understanding of varied communication styles within one classroom. According to Nurhidayah, the Head of School at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi, the distinction in learning at this special school lies in the class sizes, ranging from five to fifteen students with diverse abilities. Therefore, the teaching approach is individualized and tailored to each student's needs. In an effort to understand the students, teachers conduct assessments when new students enter SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi. These assessments aim to evaluate abilities, provide provisional diagnoses, and comprehend students' communication styles. The results determine the placement of students in classes according to their needs.

According to Gagne and Briggs (as cited in Lefudin, 2017), learning is a system designed to assist learners in the learning process through a series of events that are structured and planned to support and influence the internal learning processes of the learners. In the context of learning, teachers dominate communication by explaining the material in front of the class. Feedback from students is obtained through guidance to ensure students repeat previous explanations. Directed communication is essential due to the limitations and communication challenges faced by autistic students. Seprianis, a teacher at SLB Autism YPPA, emphasizes the importance of teachers understanding students' desires as an initial step in creating a positive atmosphere in learning. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, learning is understood as an active effort to comprehend new information by integrating it into existing cognitive structures. This process is actively undertaken by students, manifesting in various forms such as seeking experiences, gathering information, solving problems, observing the environment, and demonstrating understanding to achieve specific objectives. Consequently, prior knowledge is pivotal in the successful acquisition of new information (Muhamimin, 2012).

Motivation also plays a key role in instructional communication. Teachers need to understand students' desires and preferences, offer praise with gentle intonation, and convey motivation with affection. This is aimed at creating a comfortable atmosphere and enthusiasm for learning among students so that the learning process can proceed effectively.

### **Learning Achievements in Individual/Therapy Classes**

Therapy Class at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi, also known as the individual class, is intended for students with autism who have difficulties in speaking and comprehending information. The therapy classroom measures 2 x 1.5 meters and is specially designed to assist students in the learning process. Each therapy class is only allocated for one student and one teacher, creating a closed environment to enhance focus on learning. Inside the therapy classroom, there is one table and two facing benches for the teacher and student. There is also a cabinet to store books and larger learning equipment. Additionally, there is a small box containing various learning aids such as papers with diverse expressions to support the teaching process. Below is an illustration of the therapy classroom.

Picture 1. Therapy Class Room



(Source: Researcher, 2023)

Learning in individual or therapy classes is conducted through the ABA method (Application Behavior Analysis). ABA, according to the Ministry of Education and Culture's Language Development and Guidance Agency, is a science that utilizes the principles of behavior theory to modify and improve specific behaviors to fit in socially. ABA therapy is a firm approach, devoid of violence, and rewards children with autism effectively (Handoko, 2009).

The implementation of the ABA method teaches discipline through a curriculum adapted from daily activities, maintaining consistency, measurability, direction, and structure, facilitating progress monitoring (Anisa R.S, 2021). Its primary goal is to enhance the students' independence and social interaction. The focus involves appreciation when students correctly respond to the teacher's instructions, whether through words or hand gestures.

According to Nofrion (2013), the teacher, as a guide, emphasizes the psychomotor aspect in learning, facilitating the students' practice until mastery of the material is achieved. This involves motor skills and bodily movements, for instance, speech techniques. The teacher demonstrates speech techniques, explains steps in a way understandable to the students, then guides the students through gestures like touching the chin or explaining mouth movements while speaking.

Through the ABA method, the psychomotor aspect can be enhanced through repeated exercises. The teacher, as a facilitator, provides a platform for the students' development. Therefore, the teacher's communication plays a crucial role in achieving learning objectives. To ensure that the learning is received by the students, educational communication in individual/therapy classes will be analyzed by researchers using Robert M. Gagne's cognitive learning theory. Gagne (1977) views learning as a process of information processing in the human brain, where information is received, processed, and produces learning outcomes.

In Gagne's cognitive learning theory, the eight learning phases become an indispensable foundation in a successful learning period, aiding in understanding communication dynamics during the learning process to achieve set learning objectives:

**Motivation Phase:** In therapy classes, the motivational phase takes the form of cheerful greetings and creating an interesting first impression. This initial impression is expected to foster the students' enthusiasm and learning desire in the class. For instance: "Good morning, lovely students! What did you have for breakfast this morning?" Based on the researcher's field observations, this phase doesn't occur every day; sometimes, it's overlooked. It's missed because the teacher forgets or due to time constraints, the teacher directly starts the lesson with the learning material. Consequently, the class atmosphere is dull, and students feel bored and lose focus during therapy.

**Introduction Phase:** After presenting a good first impression, the teacher proceeds to

introduce the learning environment, aiming for the students to understand the purpose of being in that class. The introduction phase usually begins with the teacher discussing learning-related topics, and students are asked to guess first with the teacher's guidance. For example, "Isn't it when you cry, your eyes produce tears? That's called crying." The teacher uses this method to explain the types of emotions to the students.

**Acquisition Phase:** In this phase, the teacher starts giving and explaining the learning material to the students. In therapy classes, the acquisition phase can be challenging because students are required to understand the explanations provided by the teacher, while focusing on a single activity is difficult for therapy students. The communication during this phase involves the teacher sitting face-to-face with the student, explaining the learning material using learning aids such as paper or objects related to the learning material. For example, the teacher explains to therapy students about different types of emotions.

**Retention Phase:** After delivering the material, during the retention phase, the therapy teacher will conduct exercises with the students regarding the newly acquired learning so that the students understand what they have learned. This phase aims to transfer newly acquired material from short-term memory to long-term memory. Communication between the therapy teacher and students during this phase involves the teacher demonstrating and emphasizing the material repeatedly, then asking the students to perform what the teacher instructed. For example: practicing to select and differentiate types of emotions through pictures shown by the teacher, the teacher presents papers with various emotions, and the student is asked to point out the emotion mentioned by the teacher (still under guidance and assistance from the teacher to differentiate them).

**Recall Phase:** This phase is more of a semi-exam. In therapy classes, the delivered material will be periodically reviewed at specific intervals to ensure the students become accustomed to it. For example, in the emotion classification material, the teacher repeats this material according to a predetermined schedule, like revisiting this material twice a week so that the material taught is embedded in the student's mind. The teacher assesses the therapy students without any guidance to measure the extent of their abilities. During this phase, the teacher communicates by pointing to objects or inquiring about previously taught material to the students, then asks the students to answer correctly.

**Generalization Phase:** This is the phase where students begin to apply the acquired information to relevant issues in their daily lives. For instance, in recognizing colors, in daily life, a student might identify the colors of clothes they see.

**Presentation Phase:** It's the phase where students are able to demonstrate skills as a result of learning. In this phase, students are familiar with the learning material taught, and they can showcase their learning achievements to the teacher as proof. For example, a student can label the colors used by themselves from head to toe when going to school.

**Feedback Phase:** Students receive evaluations as feedback on their acquired skills. The evaluation results are documented in student learning reports. The evaluation also involves the students' parents to understand the extent of the abilities their child has acquired after undergoing a learning period.

Based on the learning phases structured by Gagne, it appears that the classical classes have gone through all the learning stages outlined in the cognitivism theory. Each stage plays its role in achieving learning objectives. In the context of classical classes, the most important phase in the learning process to achieve learning goals is the retention phase. This phase revisits the material previously presented by the teacher in front of the class, supplemented with exercises to reinforce the understanding of the material taught. Moreover, during the retention phase, the material is transferred from short-term memory to long-term memory.

Although several learning stages have been undergone, according to the acknowledgment of the classical class teacher, the learning achievements so far have not reached an overall level due to several factors influencing the fulfillment of learning outcomes. One of the factors is the diversity of abilities among students in the class, resulting in an imbalance, requiring the teacher to repeat previously taught material even though new material has been introduced in subsequent meetings. This leads to a lack of learning effectiveness due to the difference in understanding between the new and unmastered materials, indirectly forcing students to face two different levels of learning understanding simultaneously.

The communication strategies employed are akin to those used in general education settings, particularly the teacher-as-lecturer approach. In this method, the teacher delivers instructional content by speaking in front of the class, aiming to impart knowledge about the subject matter. Richmond et al. (2009) assert that the lecture method is the most efficient in terms of time management during instructional periods, as it allows a significant amount of information to be conveyed to a large audience with minimal use of supplementary aids. However, from a communication perspective, the lecture method is often criticized for its ineffectiveness in engaging students actively. It positions students as passive recipients, merely listening without fostering higher-order cognitive processes such as analysis, application, or synthesis.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the analysis and research conducted by researchers in the field titled "Communication Strategies of Teachers with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Meeting Learning Outcomes at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi," the researchers draw the following conclusions: Communication between teachers and students with autism spectrum disorder at SLB Autism YPPA Bukittinggi starts with teachers understanding the students' backgrounds, likes and dislikes, how the students interact, and other related factors. Subsequently, teachers create an atmosphere conducive for students to engage in the learning process based on the understanding gained earlier. Communication between teachers and students involves a significant exchange of symbols because not all students can express their desires through words. Hence, teachers need to interpret what the students mean and take action based on these symbols. During the learning process, teachers are more dominant in communication compared to students. This occurs due to the limitations in students' abilities, necessitating teachers to guide students in communication to ensure the learning process meets its outcomes.

The educational communication strategy employed in the classical classes to meet the learning outcomes is that of the teacher as a mentor. This strategy emphasizes the psychomotor aspects in learning, where teachers facilitate students' practice until they grasp the learning objectives. The researcher used Robert M. Gagne's eight learning phases: motivation, introduction, acquisition, retention, recall, generalization, performance, and feedback. These learning phases assist the researcher in analyzing effective learning strategies to fulfill the learning outcomes.

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