

Analyzing the Nature of Pronoun Deficiency of Bengali Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

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Abstract

In this study, the nature of pronoun deficiency of Bengali children with ASD was analyzed to explore their understanding of pronouns and proficiency of using pronouns. The participants of this study were 10 children with ASD ranging from 8 to 10 years. The data had been extracted from the participants by using two stimuli namely personal narrative and story narrative. In addition, their classroom activities were closely observed. Two sets of questionnaires had been used to extract data from the parents and the teachers of these children. The finding of this research suggests that although Bengali children with ASD can comprehend very few of the personal pronouns in speech, they cannot implement them properly in their speech. The most significant finding shows that they neither understand nor use the third person subject pronoun. They showed most difficulties in pronoun reversal and echolalia is playing a vital role in this regard. Yet they are quite apt in understanding and responding to interrogative pronouns (who, what, whom, when, where). Since the pragmatic use of pronouns in Bengali is related to complex grammatical and social norms, the ASD children face difficulty in acquiring and using the rules of pronoun.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorders, Language Disorders, Communication Disorders, Pronoun, Theory of Mind (ToM)

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that begins early in childhood and lasts throughout a person's life. Deficits in language and communication are known to be one of the defining characteristics and diagnostic criteria of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Children with ASD have difficulties in acquiring and implying several components of language, communication and social skills. Similar to the social issues, there is a variety of complex communication and language impairment across the autism spectrum. The nature of these difficulties varies from person to person. Though some of the ASD children can acquire the knowledge of linguistic elements, more or less, all of them face obstacles in using that acquired knowledge properly. This is a vital impediment in their communication strategies. Therefore, language and communication issues are one of the core areas of difficulty for individuals with ASD. According to Tager-Flusberg, Paul, & Lord (2005), some specific speech difficulties are more common in children with ASDs than in children with other issues. These are 'echolalia'- where children repeat words or phrases that have been spoken by someone else either immediately or later and 'pronoun reversal', which is when a child says "you" when s/he should be saying "I" or "me".

Pronoun is a linguistic component that functions as a part of a noun phrase used by itself and can refer either to the participants in the discourse or to someone or something mentioned elsewhere in the discourse. It is the substitute of a noun. As it is an abstract concept of language, children with autism spectrum disorders find it more difficult to understand and use in their linguistic expression. Thus, we can infer that Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders face difficulties in acquiring, comprehending and applying pronouns due to its abstractness.

This research has been designed to investigate the nature of pronoun deficiency of Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). At the same time, this research has explored their understanding of the rules of language, with special reference to the consciousness of pronoun, proficiency of using pronoun, its patterns and norms that they apply to construct language.

2. Autism, language disorder and pronoun deficiency

Communication is a complex cognitive and motor activity. It includes semantics (understanding the meaning of words) and pragmatic (social use) of language (Wray et al., 2005).

According to Simms & Jin (2015:357):

“Language provides a shared convention for communicating with others. It also serves as a medium through which learning and social interactions occur. In the broadest sense, communication abilities encompass all of the actions and skills involved in exchanging information, thoughts, and feelings with others. As such, communication skills have both verbal and nonverbal components. More specifically, language abilities refer to the use and understanding of words and sentences. At the most basic level, the essential structural components of language include sound production (phonemes), word meaning (semantics), grammar (syntax), and rhythm and intonation of speech (prosody). Higher-order language abilities involve appropriate functional use of verbal and nonverbal skills for effective communication (pragmatics).”

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are pervasive neurodevelopmental conditions characterized by several and severe cognitive and social deficits, including language and communication problems, repetitive and stereotypical behavior, and problems with social interaction (Bailey et al., 1996). Children with ASD have qualitative impairment in language, social interaction and communication. Their language and communication impairments vary according to the severity of their autism. They face difficulties to acquire, comprehend and use the complex norm of languages due to their cognitive and social deficiency. As pronouns are a grammatical phenomenon of language, ASD children face troubles in understanding and using different pronouns in different contexts. From the previously mentioned theory of pronouns we can see that pronouns of a language possess very complex grammatical functions, pragmatic and socio-cultural functions. Moreover, the use of appropriate reference requires perspective-taking and judgments about what is appropriate in the current context (Novogrodsky, 2012). Typically developing children normally master this ability due to their typical brain functioning and development. However, ASD children face troubles mastering this complex linguistic ability due to their developmental delay and social communication disorders.

On the other hand, theory of mind is necessary for communication through language and they interact together in development (Miller, 2006). Theory of mind (TOM) development mediates both the acquisition of personal pronouns and perspective-taking abilities (Richards et al., 1999). Children with ASD are the most intensely studied clinical population in the theory of mind literature; because autism involves significant difficulties in understanding mental states or TOM (Tager-Flusberg, 2007). ASD children have deficits in understanding and expressing TOM or mental states and these deficits create difficulty in acquiring and using language and its complex grammatical norms for them. Other than this, most of the ASD children have an echolalic (repetition) pattern in their speech. Echolalia reflects a specific weakness in understanding and using grammatical knowledge, resulting in an inability to combine words spontaneously to form sentences, even though the children comprehend the overall meaning (gist) of the phrases (Simms & Jin, 2015). Therefore, this may be another cause of language as well as pronoun deficiency among children with ASD. It is clear that ASD children have language, grammatical and pragmatic difficulties which result in different pronoun deficiency. So, from the above findings it can be assumed that Bengali children with ASD also show significant pronoun deficiencies in their language.

3. Rationale of the study

Pronoun is a kind of linguistic category that is applied to construct language. It is mostly used to denote someone. Since pronouns do not have any image schema, the concept of pronoun is entirely abstract. On the other hand, pronoun mastery demands knowledge of speech roles and an ability to identify oneself and others in those roles (Charney, 1980a). Thus, children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) face various problems with the use of pronouns in language. Like other ASD children, Bengali children with ASD face difficulties to use different types of pronouns in the sentence construction. That is why, I have chosen the above title to describe the underlying causes and patterns of this problem. To the best of my knowledge, the above title has not been chosen by any previous researcher before in Bangladesh.

4. Literature Review

A wide range of studies had been conducted on the topics of pronouns and autism. The literature shows that in most of the cases the conversational problems that the children with autism face emerges from pronoun deficiency. In these studies, a vast majority of the researchers argued that autistic children have problems with comprehending and applying the knowledge of pronouns in their communication. These also claim that autistic children have problems with personal pronoun, subject pronoun and pronoun reversal; whereas other studies support that the problems occur in the autistic children due to echolalia, social impairment and lack of TOM (Theory of Mind). In the following, we are providing some of the seminal studies and research articles that exclusively provided the nature of pronoun use performed by autistic children.

A research conducted by Lee, Hobson & Chiat (1994) illustrates the difficulty of using personal pronouns in spontaneous speech is a common phenomenon among the autistic children. In this study, children with autism have been found to interpret *you* as *I*, and vice versa. This phenomenon, termed as ‘pronoun reversal’, is argued to be due to their difficulties with shifting reference, and to general problems with pragmatics. The researchers also reported that autistic children have different difficulties with using personal pronouns in their daily life.

Jordan (1989) found a marked difference in the usage of ‘me’ and ‘you’ in a study conducted upon eleven autistic children. The study shows the autistic children do not have the tendency of ‘pronoun reversal’. They produce incorrect case pronouns or proper names for referencing themselves and others. He compared 11 autistic children with normal ones to assess the use of the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘me’. There was almost no remarkable difference between these two groups in understanding these terms.

Collé et al. (2008) conducted a study to compare the narrative abilities of 12 adults with high-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger Syndrome (AS) versus 12 matched controls. The study focuses on the use of referential expressions (temporal expressions and anaphoric pronouns) during a storytelling task. The aim of the study was to assess pragmatics skills in people with high-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger Syndrome (AS). They found no significant differences in general narrative abilities between the two groups, but specific pragmatic deficits in people with HFA/AS. They also stated that adults with high-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger Syndrome (AS) use fewer personal pronouns, temporal expressions and referential expressions, which require theory of mind (TOM) abilities. The results of their study confirmed both predictions. The finding of the study shows higher rates of ambiguous pronoun use of adults with high-functioning autism in a storytelling task.

Bartak & Rutter (1974) examined 8 spontaneously echolalic autistic children (mean age, 9 years and 7 months). Their study, a classic hypothesis regarding the source of pronoun reversal, has attributed the phenomenon to echolalia, and found that children were simply repeating the pronouns used in adult speech, and not using them referentially.

Hobson, Lee & Hobson (2010) examined 14 children with autism who were four years old. They were tested on the basis of their performance in several structured tasks. The result reviewed that they were less likely to use third person subject pronouns. The comprehension and expression of first person plural pronouns (“We”) of the children with ASD were almost similar to the controls. In their study, they mentioned that among the participants with autism, third person pronoun use seemed to reflect limited communicative engagement, but first person pronouns were relatively spared.

Novogrodsky (2013) conducted a research to compare the structure of performance in two tasks (retelling task and storytelling task). The study proved that children with ASD produced more ambiguous third-person subject pronouns than that of typically developing (TD) children in the storytelling task. In this study, the retelling task showed no group differences in third-person subject pronoun ambiguity. The author mentioned that the task demands of reforming a story and initiating a new story were not the same. A wide range of narrative planning and linguistic capacity was expected from a child while s/he produced a new story compared to when a child retells a story. That is why, the children with ASD produced more ambiguous third person subject pronouns than their TD peers during generating new stories. The results of this study also supported the assumption that pronoun use is a constituent of the pragmatic linguistic domain (Hamann, 2011) as children with ASD who, by definition, lacking their pragmatic skills, also showed impairments in the use of clear third-person subject pronouns in challenging tasks.

Perovic, Modyanova & Wexler (2013) studied the knowledge of constraints on the interpretation of personal and reflexive pronouns, an aspect of grammar not previously investigated in autism. Fourteen children with autism showed some difficulties comprehending personal pronouns, but no difference was observed in two groups of younger controls matched on non-verbal IQ or receptive grammar. However, their interpretation of reflexives was significantly worse than that of the control children.

Nasrin (2015) said that the autistic children do not express many abstract forms. Therefore, they intermingle the perception and production of the real and abstract aspects of language (except the savants). Accordingly, these children are unable to comprehend various abstract grammatical elements along with pronouns. In her study, she concluded that in our society the issue of hierarchy and prestige reflected in the verb and pronoun of Bengali is very much sensitive. Specifically, the use of pronouns in Bengali society is directed, manipulated and determined by the ranking of power and dignity. A typically developing child easily becomes expert at these social norms of language use throughout his/her growth as a member of the society. But a few of autistic children, who in spite of being apt in using language, failed to attain that level of comprehension in social norms of language use. That is why, autistic children could not comprehend the norms of social language and failed to use appropriate pronouns according to the social rules.

Fay (1979) asserted that either no differentiation of the self, or recurrent tendency of echolalia is playing a vital role in the speech pattern of an autistic child that determines the long-recognized difficulties of the speaking autistic child with the use and nonuse of personal pronouns (reversal and avoidance).

Tager-Flusberg & Anderson (1991) investigated communicative competence in autistic children. One of the findings of their study showed that the production of ambiguous pronouns might reflect theory of mind (TOM) deficits, in which the child did not take the listener's perspective into account.

Charney (1980b) claimed that several studies have stated that cognitive or linguistic rather than social deficits underlined pronoun reversals in autistic children. However, such deficits were insufficient to account directly for pronoun reversals. But young typically developed children had these same constraints and they did not reverse pronouns. It was suggested that autistic children intended to reverse pronouns due to their social impairments.

According to Ariel (2001), using clear pronouns required monitoring the listener's mental model of the discourse. This monitoring ability is expected to decrease when TOM is impaired. From this study, we can suggest that when children with ASD try to refer to someone their monitoring of the listener's mental model is not sufficient, and thus they produce ambiguous pronouns.

In the light of the findings of aforementioned studies, it is evident that children with ASD have different deficits in using and comprehending personal and social pronouns, third person subject pronouns etc. They have problems in reversing pronouns and understanding social norms of pronouns. Thus, we can infer that Bengali children with ASD face difficulties in acquiring, comprehending and applying different pronouns due to its abstractness and grammatical complexity. According to this hypothetical ground the present study aims at analyzing the nature of pronoun deficiency of Bengali children with ASD.

5 Method

This research has been conducted following the maxims of qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is defined as a research method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication.

According to Dörnyei, Z. (2007: 24):

“Qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analyzed primarily by non-statistical methods.”

It also includes continuous and casual observation in both formal and informal settings. This methodology best suits the subject matter and span of this research.

5.1 Adopting qualitative research method

Qualitative research methodology has been applied to extract data because this research is firmly related to linguistic behavior. So, to extract data, interview sessions and observation had been included. This played a vital role since close observation is essential to explain any behavior. In some cases, to have a clear view along with observation an interview session was required. To reflect and explain the entire situation the parent and teacher perspectives were also essential. To know and collect significant information, interviewing them was necessary in this regard.

Moreover, qualitative interpretation is the most ancient way of investigating linguistic phenomena. In quantitative data analysis, researcher evaluates the data on the basis of its quantity but qualitative data analysis offers the opportunity to evaluate the data from a qualitative perspective. This research endeavors to explain the nature of pronoun deficiency of Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The nature of pronoun (one of the complex grammatical elements of language) deficiency of Bengali ASD children can be analyzed perfectly following qualitative research method. That is why; the researcher has chosen this method.

5.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of the research are:

- To explain the nature of pronoun deficiency of Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).
- To identify which personal pronouns are mostly disordered in the expression of Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

5.3 Research Questions

a) Primary Research Question

What is the nature of pronoun deficiency of Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD)?

b) Secondary Research Question

Which personal pronouns are mostly disordered in the expression of Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD)?

5.4 Participants

Ten children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) participated in this study. The participants were recruited from SK Special Care Home, A Therapy Based Special School and a renowned institute for schooling and preparing the autistic children, situated in Narayanganj. They were the students of that school. The age range of the participants was 8-10 years respectively. The mean age of the participants was 9 years.

5.5 Stimuli

The following stimuli were used to extract data:

5.5.1 For the participants

- a) Personal narrative
- b) Story narrative- an episode of Meena cartoon (video) were used to extract response
- c) Classroom observation

5.5.2 For teachers and parents

- a) Interview questions for teachers
- b) Interview questions for parents

5.6 Tasks and procedure

The researcher personally got the relevant data by using the stimuli and tools mentioned above with intensive observation. Firstly, the participants were asked to give a short narrative about themselves. During the personal narrative session, the researcher asked some questions to the participants about themselves, which have been presented in the next chapter. The questions were presented in such a way where pronouns were included. Their responses were scripted in the form named 'Personal narrative' (See appendix-04). Secondly, a video of an episode of Meena cartoon had been shown and they were asked to retell the story. Their responses were recorded in the mobile phone and scripted in the form named 'Story narrative' (See appendix-05). Alongside, their classroom behaviors were closely observed. The conversation of the participants with the teachers and friends, their attention span, language proficiency, use of pronoun, echolalic speech, responses to the teachers- were noted during their classroom activities. A structured 'Observation checklist' (See appendix-06) was developed to keep the record of their participation and activities. Finally, to get a better glimpse of their performances two more interview sessions were conducted- for instance, one with their teachers and the other with their parents. Two different sets of questions were also designed to interview the teachers and parents. These interviews helped a lot in obtaining additional information about the participants' pronoun deficiencies. All the questions are attached in the appendix section (See appendix-2 and 3).

5.7 Data analysis

After completing the interviews and observations, the researcher transcribed the performance of every ASD child. At the same time, information obtained from the interviews of parents and teachers of the children were also examined to get the expected results, which have been presented in the next chapter.

6. Data Analysis and Result

This chapter reflects the analysis and interpretation of the responses of 10 participants illustrated in five different contexts. It also includes their teacher and parent's perspectives.

6.1 Personal Narrative

Personal narrative segment has focused on some significant concerns. The findings of this section are presented below:

- Upon asking- '*What is your name?*' the participants replied differently. The result of their responses is illustrated in the following chart:

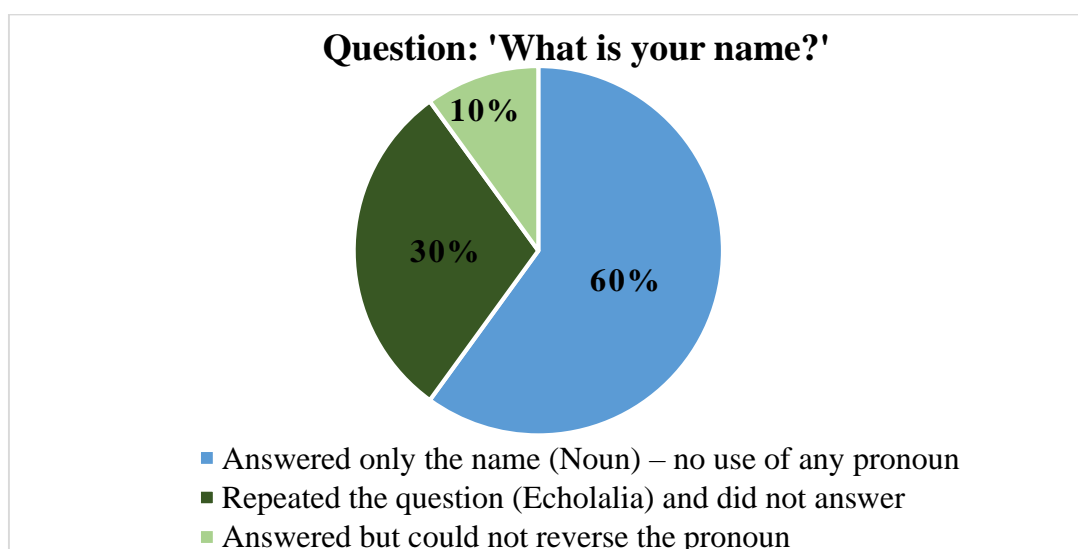


Figure 6.1. Compatibility of telling own name by using pronoun

The figure 6.1 reflects three dimensions of the extracted data. Firstly, 60% of the participants answered only their name (Noun) – no one used any pronoun. Example: One of the participants named EH answered in the following manner:

Ques: তোমার নাম কী?
[tɔmar na:m ki?]
(What is your name?)
- এহসান
[ehsan]
(Ehsan)

Secondly, 30% repeated (echolalia) the question and did not answer. Example: One of the participants named TA answered in the following manner-

Ques: তোমার নাম কী?
[tɔmar na:m ki?]
(What is your name?)
- Performed echolalia (Repeated the question)

Thirdly, only 10% answered without reversing the pronoun. Example: One of the participants named F S answered in the following manner-

Ques: তোমার নাম কী?
[tɔmar na:m ki?]
(What is your name?)
- তোমার নাম ফারহান (No pronoun reversal)
[tɔmar na:m fa:rhan]

- Upon asking ‘*With whom have you come to school?*’, the participants replied differently. The result of their responses is reflected in the following chart:

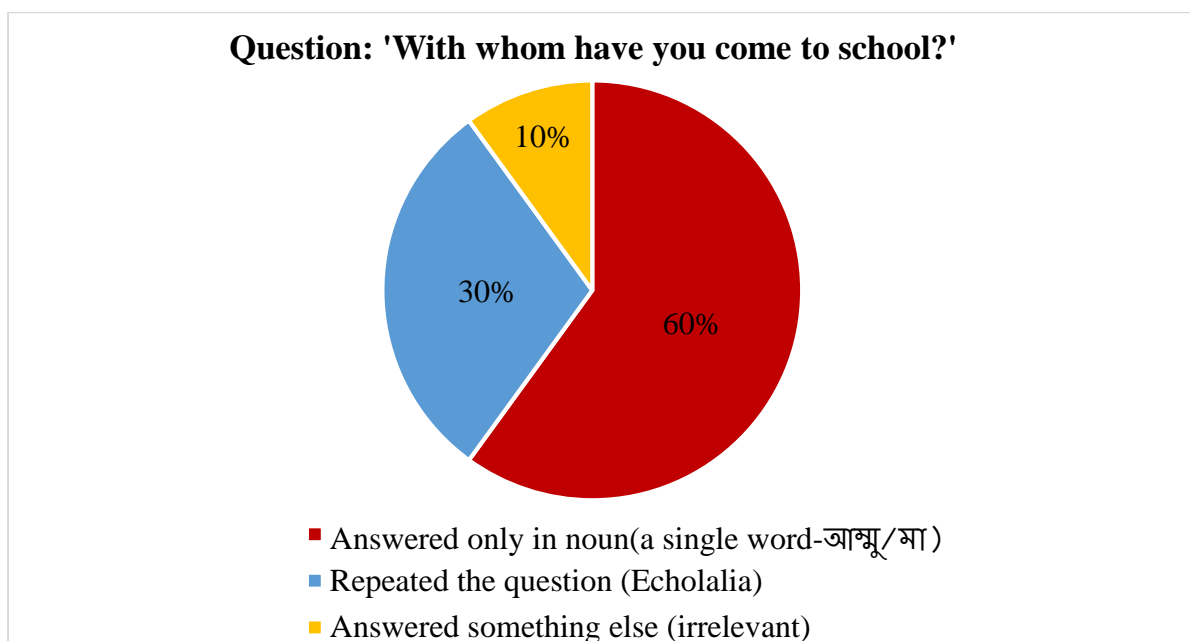


Figure 6.2. Compatibility of understanding and replying to the pronoun ‘whom’

The above figure states that 60% participants answered only in noun (a single word-আম্মা/মা). Such as- participant PC, SH, NK, TK and RC answered in the following manner:

Ques: তুমি কার সাথে স্কুলে এসেছো?

[tumi ka:r jatʰe skule ejecʰo?]

(With whom have you come to school?)

- মা

[ma:]

(Mother)

30% of the participants repeated the question (performed echolalia) and 10% said something else (irrelevant) when they were asked “তুমি কার সাথে স্কুলে এসেছো (With whom have you come to school?)”. For example, participant A R answered in the following manner:

Ques: তুমি কার সাথে স্কুলে এসেছো?

[tumi ka:r jatʰe skule ejecʰo?]

(With whom have you come to school?)

- তোমার নাম অতুল

[tomar na:m atul]

- The ratio of understanding, using, repeating (echolalia) and reversing pronouns in conversation is given below. [Here the number in each column indicates how many participants could perform that function.]

Table 6.1. The ratio of understanding, using, repeating (echolalia) and reversing of pronoun in conversation

Pronouns	Understand	Use	Use as echolalia	Reverse
আমি [ami] (I)	10	1	0	1
তুমি [tumi] (You)	7	0	4	0
তোমার [tomar] (Your)	10	0	7	0
তোমরা [tomra] (You)	0	0	0	0
সে [je] (S/he)	0	0	0	0
তোমাদের [tomader] (Yours)	6	0	3	0

According to the Table 6.1, ‘আমি (I)’ and ‘তুমি (You)’ are the two mostly familiar pronouns performed by every ASD children. Yet surprisingly except one participant, none used these two although they comprehend these pronouns. For example: the participant PC said the following sentence using ‘আমি (I)’:

আমি প্রতয় চন্দ্র

[ami prottoy tʃondro]

(I am Prottoy Chandra)

No one understood and used the pronoun 'সে (S/he)'. The most noticeable finding lies in their proximity towards echolalia. 50% of the participants had habitual proximity towards echolalia ranging from mild to severe state. One reason that impedes the pronoun schemata in their speech is 'reversal cannot take place due to echolalia'. Hence, two other common drawbacks in their speech were lack of proper reversal of pronoun and problems with plural forms of pronouns, for example-

Participant FS replied in the following manner:

Ques: তোমাদের বাসায় কে কে আছে?
 [tɔmaɖer bafai ke ke a: ʃʰe]
 (Who are there in your home?)
 - তোমাদের বাসায় আমরা
 [tɔmaɖer bafai ammu]

Participant AA replied in the following manner:

Ques: তোমাদের স্কুলের নাম কী?
 [tɔmaɖer skuler na:m ki?]
 (What is the name of your school?)
 - তোমাদের স্কুল
 [tɔmaɖer skul]

Though they can comprehend 'তুমি (You)', they fail to comprehend 'তোমরা (You) and তোমাদের (Your)'.

6.2 Story narrative

During the story retelling session, everyone was able to say the name of the cartoon. They understood the pronouns 'আমি (I) [ami]' and 'তুমি (You)', but only 10% of them used the pronoun 'আমি (I) [ami]' and 'তুমি (You)'. Participant PC replied in the following manner:

Ques: তুমি কী দেখলে?
 [tumi ki dekʰle]
 (What do you see?)
 - আমি মীনা
 [ami mīna]
 (I am Meena)

They neither understood nor responded to the pronoun 'সে (S/he)'. Similarly, no one understood 'সবাই (All)'. For example: Participant AA replied in the following manner:

Ques: সে মন খারাপ কেনো করলো?
 [ʃe mɔn kʰarap keno korlo?]
 (Why did she get upset?)
 - No response

Ques: মীনা সবাইকে কী বললো?
 [mīna ʃobaike ki bollo?]
 (What did Meena say to everyone?)
 - মীনা বললো
 [mīna bollo]
 (Meena said)

Although 10% of the participants understood ‘তাকে (Her)’, no one used it in their speech. Among the participants 60% understood ‘কে (Who)’. For instance, participant FS replied in the following manner:

Ques: মীনাকে কে বকা দিলো?
[mīnake ke bōkadilo?]
(Who scolded Meena?)
- মা
[ma:]
(Mother)

70% merely repeated (echolalia) the questions. There was no reversal of pronoun and the rate of wrong use of pronoun was 40%. For example- participant SH replied using wrong pronoun:

Ques: তুমি কী দেখলে?
[tumi ki dekʰle?]
(What do you see?)
- তুমি মীনা
[tumi mīna]
(You are Meena)

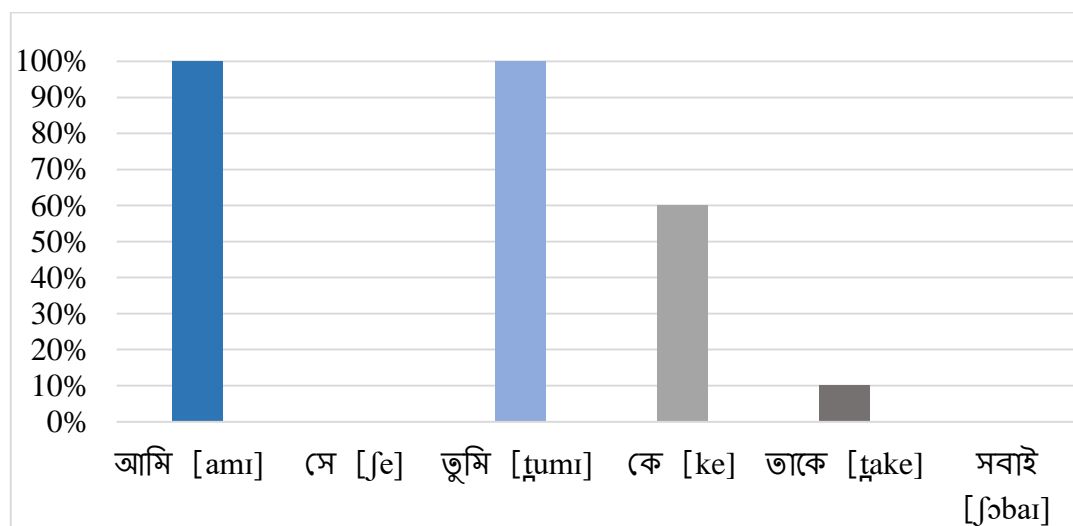


Figure 6.3. Percentage of the pronouns that the ASD children could perceive during the story narrative session

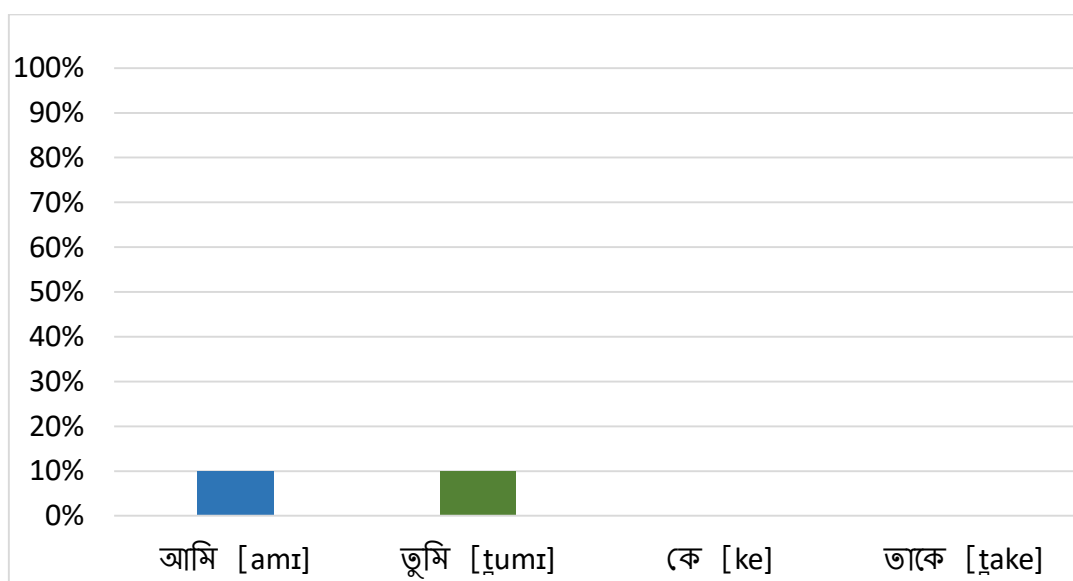


Figure 6.4. Percentage of pronouns that the ASD children could use during the story narrative session

6.3 Observation

Close observation of the participants reveals the fact that 70% of them were very prone to echolalia. Everyone understood ‘আমি (I)’ and ‘তুমি (You)’ but only 30% of the participants could use ‘আমি (I)’ and 10% can use ‘তুমি (You)’ properly in their speech. Instead of ‘আমি (I)’, they used their name directly. No other pronoun was used in their speech. Almost everyone understood ‘আমরা (My/mine)’ and ‘তোমরা (Your)’, yet no one used these two pronoun in their speech. No one understood and used the pronoun ‘সে (S/he)’. Although some of them understood ‘এটা (This) and ‘ওটা (That)’, but they never used these pronouns in their language. 40% participants understood ‘আপনি (You), আমরা (We), তোমরা (You), আমাদের (Our/ours), and তোমাদের (Yours)’, but did not use while talking. 60% of them understand ‘কী (What), কোথায় (Where), কার (Whom)’ and could answer these type of questions. There was no pronoun reversal in the speeches of participants. Most of them had the tendency to speak only using noun or pointing on an object or eye gaze.

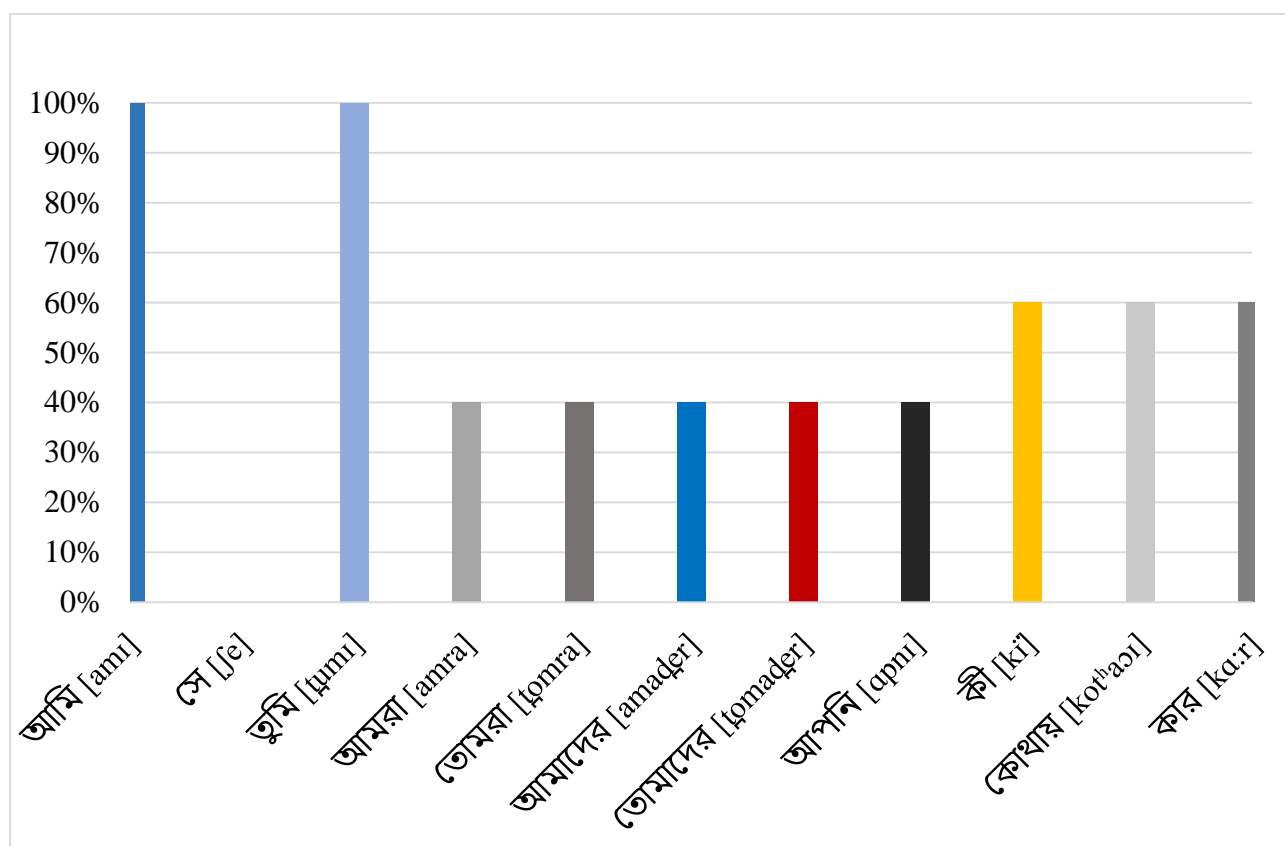


Figure 6.5. Percentage of comprehending pronouns during the observation session

6.4 Teacher's perspectives

According to the responses of the teachers, 50% of the participants can use two pronouns ‘আমি (I)’ and ‘তুমি (You)’ during communicating with the teacher in the class, whereas other 50% cannot or do not use. The reason for their avoidance of pronouns may be due to several individual problems. The problems include- hearing problem, behavioral problem, echolalia, grammatical complexity, convulsion, lack of parent's awareness, lack of communication at home, lack of practice of the therapies at home etc. In referring to the family members almost everyone mentioned the names instead of using pronouns. 70% of the participants have a habitual proximity towards echolalia. Upon asking their name, they only tell their name. 10% of the participants replied in full sentence but he could not reverse the pronoun, example: Participant FS was asked:

Ques: তোমার বাবার নাম কী?
[tomrar ba:ba:r na:m ki?]
(What is your father's name?)

He replied-

‘তোমার বাবার নাম এরহান’
[tomrar ba:ba:r na:m erhan]
(Your father's name is Erhan)’.

Other than this, none of them performs the complete sentence like “আমার নাম X”. To enhance the use of pronouns we must use different games and playing activity, speech therapy, picture cards, storytelling activity, we need to involve them in proper communication at home, more interaction with parents etc. Most of the children can use only ‘আমি (I)’ in their speech properly but they can comprehend almost every pronoun except ‘সে (S/he, তাদের (Their), আপনাদের (Yours)’ etc.

6.5 Parent’s perspectives

70% of the participants do not use any pronoun while communicating with parents or relatives. 30% of the participants can only use the pronouns ‘আমি (I)’ and ‘তুমি (You)’. The reason for their avoidance of using pronouns may be due to several individual problems. The problems include- developmental delay, behavioral problem, echolalia, grammatical complexity, convulsion, lack of proper schooling and therapy. While referring to the friends or teachers almost everyone mentions the names instead of using pronouns. 70% of the participants have a habitual proximity to echolalia. Upon asking their name, they just say their name. Nobody says that ‘আমার নাম X’. To enhance the use of pronouns we must use play activity, speech therapy, picture cards, storytelling activity, we need to assure proper schooling for them, regular training and communication. Only 30% of the children can use ‘আমি (I)’ in their speech properly but they can comprehend almost every pronoun except ‘সে (She/he), তাকে (Him/her), তার (His/her),’ and plural forms such as ‘তারা (they) তোমাদের (Yours), আমাদের (Our)’.

6.6 Comparison of the most common findings in all the contexts

A close comparison between the five contexts reveals that more or less every ASD child is able to use only two personal pronouns ‘আমি’ and ‘তুমি’. Hence, the finding of the current study shows that the ratio of using these two pronouns by the ASD children varies from context to context. The following chart presents the percentages of using these two pronouns according to the five contexts:

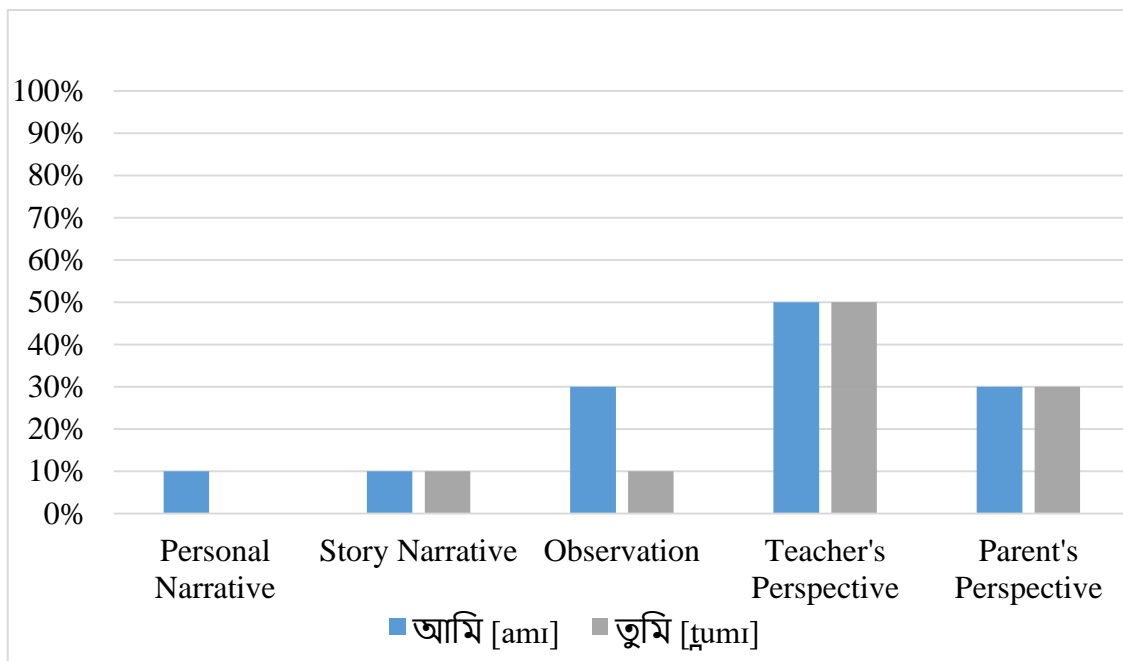


Figure 6.6. Using scenario of the personal pronouns ‘আমি [ami]/ I’ and ‘তুমি [tumi]/You’

Most of the participants are very prone to echolalia. Their proximity towards echolalia is evident in the five contexts. The contextual percentage of the number of participants who are prone to echolalia is given in the following chart:

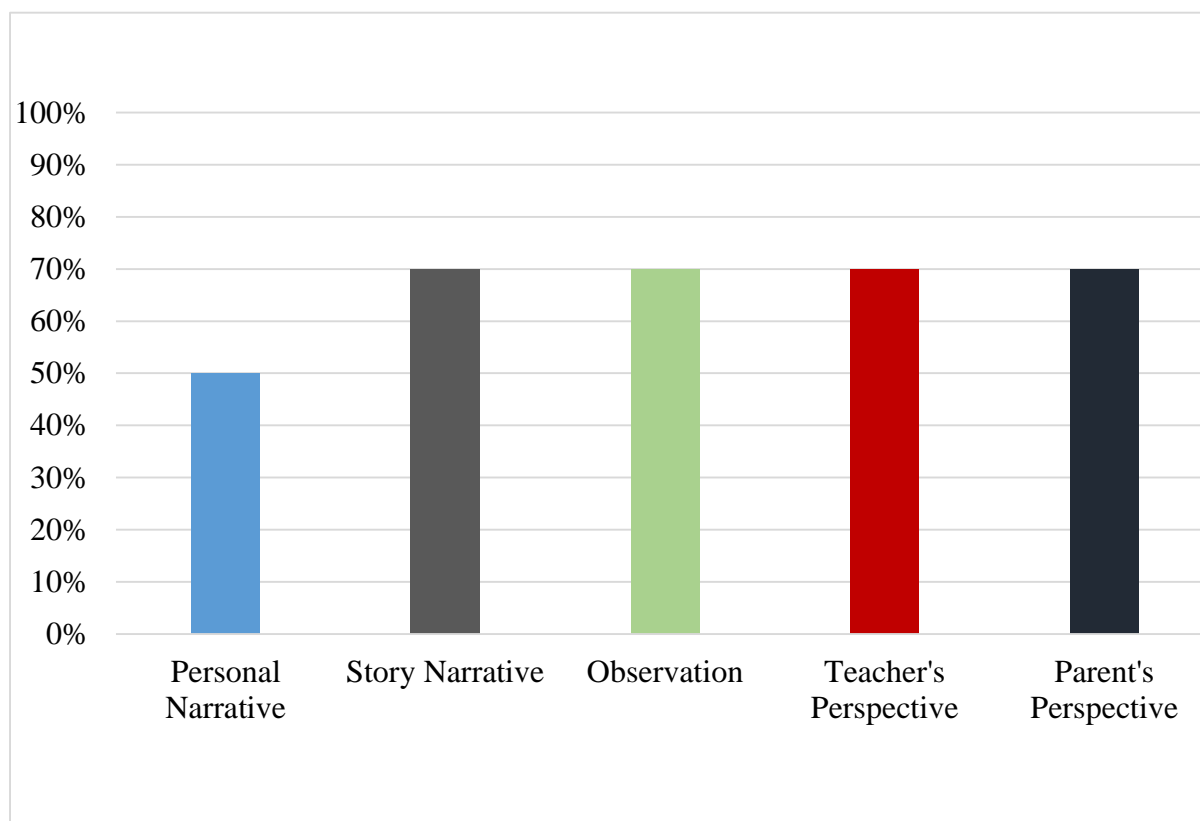


Figure 6.7. The percentage of habitual proximity towards echolalia

7. Discussion

The study exhibits several key findings that shed light on the nature of pronoun deficiency of Bengali children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The pronoun in the speech of autistic children is very intricate. Their knowledge of using pronouns varies depending upon two components-severities of autism and other behavioral symptoms.

- First of all, it is found that more or less all the participants have the knowledge of two personal pronouns ‘আমি (I)’ and ‘তুমি (You)’. They hardly use these two pronouns in their speech. Although they quite often use ‘আমি (I)’ but they avoid using ‘তুমি (You)’. Instead of addressing as ‘তুমি (You)’, they point out the person to be addressed. In Bengali language the pronoun ‘তুমি (You)’ has different variants such as- ‘আপনি, তুমি, তুই’. The uses of these variants are closely knitted with the social norms and rules of our culture. It had been noted that due to their deficits in social communication and pragmatics they address everyone as ‘তুমি (You)’ and omit two other variants. Thus, they fail to master the context of using ‘আপনি, তুমি, তুই’. Nasrin (2015) claimed that the use of pronouns in Bengali society is directed, manipulated and determined by the ranking of power and dignity. A typically developing child as a member of the society easily masters these social norms of language use throughout his/her growth. However, a few of autistic children, who in spite of being apt in using language, fail to attain that level of comprehension in social norms of language use. That is why; autistic children cannot comprehend the norms of social language and fail to use appropriate pronouns according to the social rules. This research finding also reflects a similar instance.
- In this study, it had been found that Bengali children with ASD have different difficulty with using personal pronoun (আমি, তুমি, আপনি, সে, তার etc.) in conversation. This finding is also supported by Lee, Hobson & Chiat (1994). They illustrated that difficulty with using personal pronouns in spontaneous speech is a common phenomenon among the autistic children and they also reported that autistic children have different difficulties with using personal pronouns in their daily life.

- The most significant finding of this research underlies in the fact that, Bengali autistic children exhibit deficiency in using ‘সে (S/he)’, a third person singular number pronoun. This deficiency ranges from comprehension to application. However, our finding regarding the third person pronoun matches with the finding of Hobson, Lee & Hobson (2010), who examined 14 children with autism and their result reviews that autistic children are less likely to use third person subject pronouns.
- Among the possessive pronouns though they can properly comprehend ‘আমার (My/mine)’ and ‘তোমার (Your)’, they cannot use these in their everyday language. They cannot use these pronouns because of the abstractness and grammatical complexity of these elements. They face troubles in reversing these pronouns during conversation. Due to echolalia, they instantly repeat the words and sentences, thus they fail to use and reverse these pronouns. Hence, they have a common problem with ‘আমাদের (Our/ours)’ and ‘তোমাদের (Yours)’. Since these are the plural forms of pronouns, they face more difficulties in understanding and using them. Other than this one most surprising finding is they can comprehend and respond very aptly to the demonstrative pronouns ‘এটা (This)’ and ‘ওটা (That)’. Interrogative pronouns ‘কী (What), কোথায় (Where), কার (whom) and কে (Who)’ are very familiar to them and they can soundly answer to the questions that are related to these pronouns.
- The tendency of not reversing pronouns is a very common phenomenon in the language of the autistic children. Yet in this study, none of the participants showed any tendency towards pronoun reversal. The grammatical complexities of the usage of pronouns in Bangla are playing a crucial role here. Like Jordan’s (1989) findings, this study also marked a difference in the usage of ‘you’ and ‘me’. His study also showed that the autistic children do not have the tendency of ‘pronoun reversal’.
- The prime research finding lies in the phenomenon of echolalia. 70% of the participants were prone to echolalia ranging from severe state to milder. The reason that impedes the development of pronoun schemata is therefore echolalia since, echolalia demands for a rapid echoing of the heard speech. This is the reason behind their avoidance of pronoun reversal. Fay (1979) asserts that recurrent tendency of echolalia is playing a vital role in the speech pattern of an autistic child that determines the long-recognized difficulties of the speaking autistic child with the use and nonuse of personal pronouns (reversal and avoidance). In a study Bartak & Rutter (1974) developed a classic hypothesis regarding the source of pronoun reversal and attributed the phenomenon to echolalia, and found that children were simply repeating the pronoun in adult speech, and not using them referentially. This hypothesis has been proved to be true in this research too where 70% participants have habitual proximity towards echolalia. Moreover, repeating the researcher’s speech during the personal narrative session, story retelling session and classroom observation were a common tendency of the participants.
- In the story-telling task like Collé et al. (2008) this research also found that children with (ASD) used fewer personal pronouns, temporal expressions and referential expressions, which require theory of mind (TOM) abilities. As autistic children lack proper TOM ability, they fail to understand social relations, other’s perspectives and mental states. Due to impaired TOM ability, proper development of words and language is interrupted. Thus, children with ASD lack proper knowledge of personal pronouns and they face troubles in using them.

The findings of the current study are more or less similar to the studies of the earlier researchers. However, these findings of the current study are very much important, as they are new to the context of Bengali language.

8. Conclusion

It has already been mentioned that pronouns are a more abstract concept of language. They cannot be represented with realia as well as nouns. A typically developed child learns the norms and use of pronouns normally due to her physical and psychological development as a member of the society. ASD children cannot adopt the difficult norms of pronouns, because of its abstractness, grammatical complexities and other social phenomena related to it. Hence, due to the lack of normal cognitive advancement and limited communicative process, they develop a very little linguistic ability. This grossly intervenes the process of learning the complex grammatical aspect of language like ‘pronoun’. Other than this, lack of interest in social communication, proper schooling, social skills and therapy, delayed diagnosis of autism, echolalia and behavioral problems make it difficult for them to learn the pragmatic aspects of using pronouns. They have a very opaque linguistic competence regarding the use of pronouns in speech. However, I think the bites and pieces that they mastered regarding using pronoun has developed due to regular therapy and proper schooling. In five different contexts, they have shown their pronoun deficiencies, which are remarkable. One of the core deficits of ASD children is impaired language and social communication skill. To develop their language ability, we need to assure their learning and use of pronouns in regular life. According to the behaviorists, language learning is similar to habit formation, so, the cycle of trial error correction reward and reinforcement can create a greater impact in this regard (Rivers, 1968).

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