

TEACHING PREPOSITIONS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH AUTISM: STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES, AND COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

Teaching strategies that can be used in teaching prepositions in early childhood education (ECE) learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Using a qualitative narrative research design, accounts from teachers who teach prepositions to early childhood education learners with ASD in selected private schools in Metro Manila were collected to identify specific teaching strategies utilized in classrooms. It is imperative to teach prepositions to ECE learners with ASD, as it accounts for the improvement of adaptive skills including navigating, doing spatial tasks, locating the placement of an object or person, and improving communication skills. Semi-structured interview questions were prepared before the one-on-one interview sessions with the teachers. Findings show that the use of visual aids, repetition, and a naturalistic approach are the most utilized strategies used in teaching prepositions to ECE learners with ASD. Teacher collaboration and the present level of performance of the child are the basis for the implementation of the teaching strategies. Research in teaching essential concepts of the English language to learners with additional needs is necessary to bridge the gap between teaching strategies and learners' acquisition of knowledge.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Early Childhood Education, Prepositions, Teaching Strategies

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzed the various strategies teachers used in teaching prepositions to early childhood education (ECE) learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Addressing these challenges by analyzing and evaluating numerous techniques would be a great help for these teachers. The essentiality of teaching prepositions for learners with ASD was highlighted as it was needed for the improvement of the quality of their communication. Moreover, the study discussed the struggles that learners with ASD experienced when communicating and recognized how knowing and applying the effective strategy in teaching prepositions contributed to the teaching and learning dynamic of the teachers and learners with ASD.

In the United States, a mandate ensures the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in educational institutions, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It states that all children diagnosed with a specific disability should have legal rights. It became a law in 1975 and

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was further improved in 2004. In the Philippines, one of the legal bases for accommodating learners with special needs is Presidential Decree No. 603, The Child and Youth Welfare Code (1974), in which Article 3 states that children who are “emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted” must be treated with sympathy and must receive competent care. Moreover, Article 74 in the same decree mentioned that there should be at least “special schools” in every province that cater to the learning needs of these individuals.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that typically becomes evident in early childhood. As defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) prospective individuals must exhibit signs such as “persistent deficits in social communication” and “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities”. These distinctive characteristics affect the child’s functional way of living. Furthermore, the characteristics listed bring complications and difficulties in their academic performance and learning process as some individuals suffer from impaired cognitive ability that affects critical thinking and comprehension.

Aside from the aforementioned deficits, learners with ASD also struggle with spatial awareness. This affects their ability to locate the position of a person or object. It is where prepositions play a significant role in connecting the relationship of the phrases within the sentence. However, Casas et al. (2019) stated that young learners often showed difficulty identifying the proper preposition to use due to its polysemous nature. Despite the existence of monosyllabic prepositions (e.g., on, to, and for), some learners are still unable to distinguish their differences (Lorincz & Gordon, 2012). Hence, teachers must look for different strategies so they can teach the use of prepositions effectively. These strategies ensure that learners with ASD will completely understand the purpose of prepositions and their use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PREPOSITIONS AND SPATIAL AWARENESS

Prepositions are words that illustrate the relationship between a noun or a noun replacement and another word (Murray, 2016). For example, in "The man was hiding under the table," the preposition "under" indicates the relationship between the man (noun) and the location (the table). Murray (2016) further noted that prepositions are used to indicate the relationships between sentences in the following ways: time, location (place or direction), means or agent, manner, state or condition, quantity or measure, and purpose or reason. Prepositions are generally polysemous, which means that they contain multiple meanings based on the context. Given that, prepositions can be confusing as there are sheer numbers in the English language.

Spatial awareness is described as the ability of a person to understand the differences of the preposition to properly locate an object or person (NHS Wales, 2017). Cardillo, Erbi, and Mammarella (2020) found that children with autism spectrum disorder exhibit inadequate spatial awareness of prepositions in their research. However, they also pointed out that some interactions with students with asd were unnecessary and did not interfere with their spatial awareness or communication. The polysemy of prepositions necessitates consideration of their spatial awareness. They are significant because prepositions are necessary for describing and defining the spatial links of a phrase (McKinney, 2018). It is important to note that learners with

ASD should be taught to recognize the meaning of the preposition used in a passage to understand its context.

CURRENT STRATEGIES USED IN TEACHING PREPOSITIONS TO LEARNERS WITH ASD

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices are assistive devices that allow people with communication deficits to communicate efficiently. In the study of Hassim (2019), AAC devices have been used as an effective aid in communication and language for learners with ASD. Learners with ASD who had received a higher level of aided input with spoken language showed a significant difference in comprehension than those who received less. It became evident that learners were able to understand directions with prepositions when given aided input such as graphic symbols. With the use of Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) installed in an iPad, the teacher will state a directive while pointing at the required object. For example "Put the doll in front of the truck." The facilitator points to the PCS equivalent of the doll and truck while stating the directive task.

Direct Instruction (DI) has also been beneficial for teaching language skills to students with ASD (Hicks, Rivera, & Patterson, 2016). The instructions were clear and focused on the students' targeted behavior. For example, if a teacher places a pencil in a specific area and asks, "Where is the pencil?" The teacher will directly reply and inform the students whether they are right or wrong. The teacher should also give direct application to real-life scenarios of the preposition, such as asking students, "Where is their pencil located?" or "Where is the chalkboard located."

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) was also utilized to teach prepositions and help students with ASD improve their language skills. Pitts (2019) found that after a year of study, students with ASD who received ABA assistance outperformed pupils who received traditional teaching methods. Cognition, language and communication, daily living skills, and socialization were noted to have improved. The early intensive behavioral interventions were evaluated using an ABA intervention in which abilities were broken down into small and teachable units and utilized reinforcements to ensure students were able to achieve objectives. Using this approach, facilitators use short directives and prompt questions such as, 'Put toy on the table.' then "Where is the toy?"

There are numerous strategies adopted in the Philippines that teachers use to teach prepositions to learners with ASD. Teachers often use the hierarchy of prompts when handling this specific group of learners. This usually pushes the learners to elicit a response appropriate to the question or task given (Miguel, 2020). Teachers could help students locate the placement of an object and its relationship to the learner by showing an illustration (e.g., a flashcard) or repeating the instructions. Moreover, roleplaying is also a common strategy in teaching English to learners in general and special needs education. This encouraged learners to perform real-life situations that allowed them to easily understand the lesson being discussed (Mojares, 2013; Talidong & Liu, 2020). With the emergence of technology, interactive video presentations were not new to many teachers. Incorporating it in teaching learners with ASD may also be deemed productive since this engages the learner's attention (Villamero, 2014).

Modeling is also one way of teaching prepositions for learners with ASD. The teacher would first demonstrate the specific task, which was the correct usage of prepositions in the

sentence, and this would serve as a guide for the students to imitate or do it. Aside from that, this led to the independence of the students. Consultation may follow through after the student has accomplished the task (Miguel, 2020; Talidong & Liu, 2020). However, teachers must provide modifications for these learners. Some of it may consist of extended time, incorporating their interests, and granting the learners autonomy to choose activities about the lesson discussed (Villamero, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

On this note, the study aims to look into the various teachers' perspectives regarding strategies for teaching prepositions to early childhood education students with autism spectrum disorder by answering the following questions:

1. What are the most effective teaching strategies in teaching prepositions to learners with autism spectrum disorder from early childhood education?
2. What are the challenges that teachers encounter in teaching prepositions to learners with autism spectrum disorder from early childhood education?
3. How does the consistency of integrating the specific teaching strategy affect the ability of learners with ASD to properly use prepositions in communication?

The study utilized a qualitative method of gathering data. The participants of the research include special education teachers who taught or are currently teaching prepositions to learners with ASD. The researchers chose to have a qualitative method of data gathering to further answer the research questions. The researchers could determine what teaching strategy is appropriate for different situations through the chosen method. An online interview was conducted to collect the participants' narratives and sentiments about the different strategies they utilized in teaching prepositions to learners with autism spectrum disorder.

METHODOLOGY

The current study employed a narrative research design that collected data through one-on-one online interviews. The researchers aimed to collect teachers' sentiments regarding the teaching strategies utilized in the classroom in terms of teaching prepositions to ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder. Creswell (2009) stated that a narrative research design is suited for a study that aims to compile various narratives to identify a particular conclusion about the topic. This also aims to explore, analyze, and investigate human experience, represented in a textual manner (Salkind, 2010). Semi-structured interview questions were used to gather the data needed for the study. The specific data gathering method was chosen as it provides valuable information about the individual's motivation for selecting the specific measure (Raworth, Sweetman, Swati Narayan, Rowlands, Hopkins, 2012).

INTERVIEW QUESTION

The researchers utilized semi-structured questions for the interview to gather data about the different strategies used in teaching prepositions for ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder, which was conducted through Microsoft Teams. Aside from that, it gave the participants and the researchers an avenue where they could share and extract information from the conversation that could be necessary for the study. It was also more free flowing, which gave the respondents a comfortable feeling when doing the process (Kakilla, 2021).

The questions to be asked to the respondents contained five sections. The structure of the questions varied as follow-up inquiry about the participant's response was employed. The said interview aimed to have an in-depth analysis of the respondents' narratives and sentiments regarding the teaching strategies they have applied in teaching prepositions for learners with ASD.

Below is an overview of the questions that the researchers utilized for the participants:

1. *What are the most effective teaching strategies in teaching learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder from Early Childhood Education?*
 - 1.1 *Among the teaching strategies you mentioned, what do you think is the most effective teaching strategy in teaching prepositions to learners with ASD from Early Childhood Education?*
2. *What are the challenges that teachers encounter in teaching prepositions to learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder from Early Childhood Education?*
 - 2.1 *How do you address these challenges?*
3. *What is the basis for choosing the specific teaching strategy in teaching prepositions for learners with ASD?*
 - 3.1 *Have you received any initial teacher education or training regarding special needs education?*
 - 3.2 *If you can rate yourself about your confidence in handling these learners, how would you rate yourself? (1 as the lowest, 5 as the highest)*
4. *How can teachers effectively implement the teaching strategies in a classroom with ASD learners?*
 - 4.1 *Is there sufficient teaching equipment and supplies (e.g., PECS, other AAC systems, sensory tools such as stress balls, sound blocking earphones, using tablets for communication) for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder at school?*
5. *How does consistency of integrating the specific teaching strategy affect the ability of learners with ASD to properly use prepositions in communication?*
 - 5.1 *What are the improvements you noticed when you implemented the specific strategies in terms of their spatial awareness?*

5.2 *What are the improvements you noticed when you implemented the specific strategies in terms of their communication?*

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic Content Analysis

A Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was applied to analyze the statements collected in the present study. TCA was extensively used in qualitative research to organize and analyze the data gathered from interviews. It was important to remember that the researchers' opinions and feelings were not to be reflected in the data collected. It was to be noted that the questions from the interviews were prepared beforehand to provide structure for the whole duration of the interaction. The steps that the researchers used to analyze the data from the interviews were derived from the study of Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016).

Tab. 1: Steps in analyzing data (TCA)

a. Transcription	<i>Putting verbal responses into words to be reviewed later.</i>
b. Coding	<i>It was the process of organizing the transcripts from the interview. Researchers would have to identify the most relevant ideas from the transcripts and should be able to form a solid construct if it answers the research questions presented.</i>
c. Reflective Notes	<i>This step was to deepen the understanding of researchers regarding the data collected. This also removes the generality of the answers as researchers have a chance to reflect and identify the different codes of the data collected.</i>
d. Classifying	<i>This was the step where researchers had to separate the codes into different themes.</i>
e. Finalization	<i>This stage was where the relevant data was synthesized and reviewed to produce a concrete narration of the findings for the present study. Data presented at this stage would be the basis for the conclusion.</i>

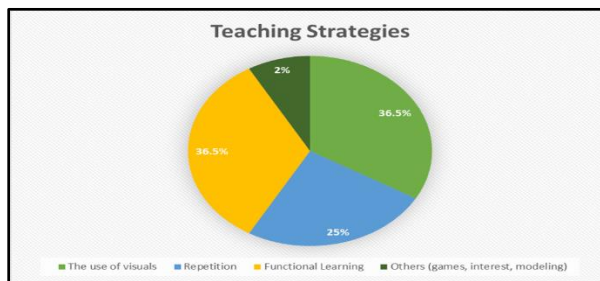
RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The data from the interviews were reviewed, and the following themes emerged during the interview process: teaching strategies; the basis for implementation; consistency of implementation; teaching challenges; addressing it; and teacher training. Thematic content analysis was applied to analyze the narratives of the respondents and identify their perceptions about the strategies they used in teaching prepositions to ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder. Through this method, the researchers were able to identify the common themes surrounding the responses.

A. TEACHING STRATEGIES

Three teaching strategies that the respondents utilized in teaching prepositions to early childhood education (ECE) learners with autism spectrum disorder have emerged: The use of visuals (e.g., pictures, flashcards); repetition of instruction; and functional teaching.

Fig 1: Strategies in teaching prepositions to ECE learners with ASD



In the data shown above, 36.5% of the respondents said that they use **visual materials** as their teaching strategy in teaching prepositions to ECE learners with ASD. Visual aids are defined as “concrete cues that provide information about an activity, routine, or expectation and support skill demonstration” (Wong et al., 2014, p. 104). A number of respondents also utilize **functional activities** in teaching prepositions to these learners. They believe that functional activities as one of the classroom instructions is essential for these learners to increase autonomy, self-help, and daily living skills. One of the respondents explained that using it, such as taking out diapers from the child’s bag, helps the learner demonstrate their learning about prepositions. This shows that applying prepositions in their day-to-day activities supports their ability to locate the item.

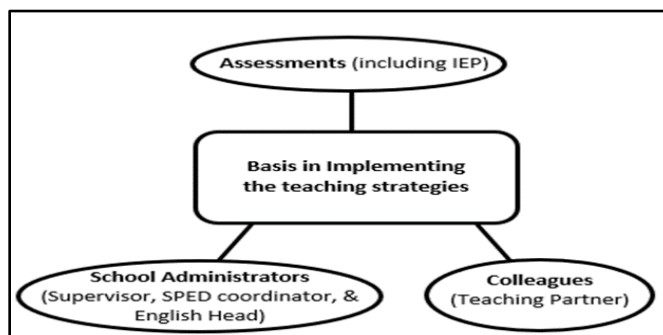
“Out of the blue (every day), you’ll suddenly remember to ask the children to take out their diapers. Once said, they will go to their respective bags. and I will tell them to “(take) out” and then “put it in.” I also inform the child that an object fell by saying, “Can you get the toy under the table?” and you’ll notice that the child already knows where to look.”

Using **repetition** as a form of instruction in teaching prepositions to learners with ASD is slightly lower than the first two. These teachers elaborated that repetition in instruction is handy in teaching prepositions to learners with autism spectrum disorder since it helps learners retain the lesson and remember the past discussions. Others also mentioned some strategies in teaching prepositions, such as games, modeling, and using the interest of the learners to deliver instruction. All the respondents also emphasized the importance of choosing the appropriate teaching strategy that caters to the academic needs of these learners.

B. THE BASIS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE TEACHING STRATEGIES

Numerous factors influence teachers in choosing and identifying the prepositional teaching strategies for ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder. However, two sub-themes have emerged from the interview that show the basis of implementing specific prepositional teaching strategies for ECE learners with ASD: assessments; and school administrators & colleagues.

Fig. 2: Basis for implementing the teaching strategies



The researchers also noticed that aside from the assessments, teachers also seek advice from their school administrator and colleagues.

“If we have free time, we share the different strategies we incorporate with each other, especially when we have a student who is difficult to handle. We talk about the best thing to do and what they think is effective because we frequently stick to one strategy that we are already used to. It’s also nice that we get to share what we implement, and we can also ask our supervisor about this matter.”

It is also interesting that one respondent acknowledged relying on the learner’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) which discusses the services, goals, and accommodations to be given to them. With the recommendation of other related-services professionals (e.g., speech therapists), they will try to integrate teaching strategies to hone and develop the areas where the child is lacking.

C. CONSISTENCY IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PREPOSITIONAL TEACHING STRATEGY

How consistency of implementation affects the spatial awareness of the ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder

It is worth mentioning that all respondents agreed that there was indeed an improvement in understanding prepositions in terms of their spatial awareness when the teachers utilized their mentioned teaching strategies to their respective ECE learners with ASD. One of the respondents reiterated that when she asked her student to get a toy under the table, she would say, “get the toy UNDER the table.” The student will then look under the table and grab it. The responses of other respondents coincided with this observation.

How consistency of implementation affects the communication of the ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder

Only a few respondents were able to give clear insights regarding the improvement in understanding prepositions in terms of the communication of ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder. One respondent gave an example of where they had an event in school. She will tell the student to stay “ON” that position (e.g., circle marker). The ability of the child to remain in a specific place for the whole duration of the performance was a significant improvement for them in terms

of communication despite being nonverbal because it showed that the learner was able to understand the instruction of the teacher. It was also mentioned that even parents were delighted to find out that there was an improvement in the preposition vocabulary of the child. They can use this to converse even in the confines of their homes.

D. TEACHING CHALLENGES

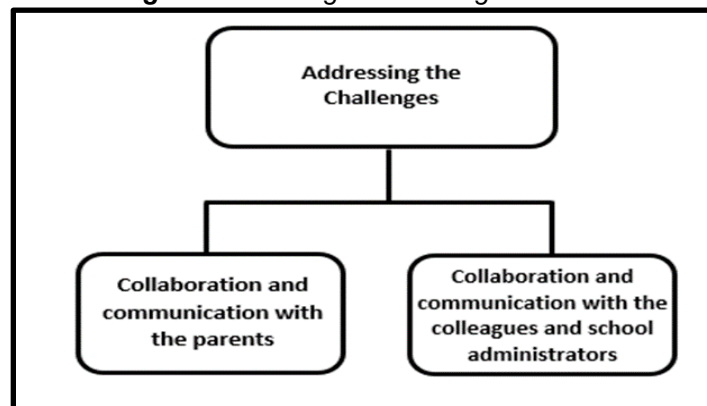
The researchers found three recurring teaching challenges that teachers encounter when teaching prepositions to learners with ASD: student attention, language barrier, and student behavior. Firstly, the teachers specified that sustaining the child's attention is really important in giving instruction and improving comprehension. Aside from the three distinct characteristics of children with ASD (impaired social skills, deficit in communication skills, and presence of repetitive behaviors), this group of learners also has a deficit in putting their attention on a specific task or activity.

“Catching their attention is difficult. You really need to have a Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. If those plans don't work, you have to try again on another day.”

“Having a wide array of activities that is necessary. Also, incorporating their interest is an advantage. So, if they like dinosaurs, you need to incorporate it in teaching prepositions to the child.”

E. ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Fig. 3: Addressing the challenge Parents



Some respondents acknowledged that they communicate with students' parents whenever they have difficulty teaching students with ASD. It was their technique of keeping parents informed about their children's progress. In that way, parents could help create a way to instruct their children at home. They ensure that they report what they have currently learned, and with that, the parents try to incorporate these lessons into their home. However, there are also instances where the parents only acknowledge it but do not practice the lesson taught, which results in the learners forgetting it instantly.

“We always inform the parents about what we did in school. Sometimes, parents repeat the lessons we learned in school when they get home but there are also parents that do not review the lessons at home. This results in some students regressing and forgetting what they learn. So, what we do is establish the

skill in school by doing the activity again and again until they absorb it Professionals

The same number of respondents also agreed that they needed to consult with professionals to devise a strategy for dealing with the difficulty of teaching students with ASD. The professionals the respondents mentioned in helping them develop teaching strategies to solve their challenges were SpEd or the school's head coordinator and their shadow teacher. Furthermore, one teacher addressed this difficulty by making a fun activity. The teacher added that making a fun exercise will stimulate the children's interest, especially if they are students with special needs. Accommodation and modifications are also the important elements that should always be considered when employing classroom instruction.

"It is really important to coordinate with other professionals concerned with the child. We talk about our observations, what strategy or approach worked and what didn't, then we draft a new plan for the coming months. After that, we get the approval of our department head, SpEd coordinator, and pre-school coordinator. We have to go through all that as part of our protocol."

F. TEACHER TRAINING (Seminars)

Teacher training has played a significant role in knowing what strategies to use to teach prepositions to learners with ASD. Most of the respondents have specifically mentioned seminars that served as their teacher training for teaching prepositions and handling students with special needs. Alongside this, Teacher L said how seminars served as a refresher when he started teaching prepositions to students with ASD, where he realized its importance, especially after he started teaching.

"Yes, it (seminars) really helps because you get to know the trends in curriculum implementation. You will also realize that some of the things you learned before, which you thought were irrelevant, are now very important to your practice. You will also discover your progress and maturity as an educator."

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study closely examined the narratives of teachers that were currently teaching or have experienced teaching ECE learners with ASD. Participants were teachers providing lessons on prepositions to early childhood education learners with autism spectrum disorder from private schools in Metro Manila. The findings stated in this study were based on the teachers' personal experiences, which could then be subjective and grouped by using thematic content analysis. Experiences may also vary due to different work environments and the employment of the teachers.

Among the prepositional teaching strategies shared by the ECE teachers, the common strategy the respondents implemented was the use of **visual materials and functional activities**. Rutherford et al. (2019) highlight the importance of using visual materials for learners with autism spectrum disorder as this supports communication (e.g., PECS) and participation among these learners. It may range from concrete objects to pictures or symbols. This is something that they can manipulate or easily rely on when they need visual prompts to elicit more understanding about the proper prepositions to be used (Pawlett, 2017). Murray (2015) stated that learners with autism spectrum disorder best learn in a natural setting. They get to be involved in the day-to-day activity, which helps them understand the concepts of prepositions easily.

Consistently doing it enhances the proper use of prepositions which enables the learners to develop effective communication (Hicks et al. 2015). Moreover, it also plays an important role in developing the spatial awareness (e.g., identifying the location, joint attention) of the learners with autism spectrum disorder.

The teachers also encountered numerous challenges when teaching prepositions to learners with autism spectrum disorder such as meltdowns, inattentiveness, and English-speaking skills. These challenges were overcome through collaboration with school stakeholders (e.g., teachers and parents). The importance of building rapport with colleagues and school administrators is emphasized in the study as these serve as an avenue to share and exchange their experiences in handling ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder. Assessment is also crucial in addressing the challenges faced by the learners when understanding prepositions. Through the assessment, it gives the teachers an idea of what strategy they may integrate that matches the learning needs of the students.

Conclusions

Findings from this study show that there is indeed an abundance of teaching strategies that can be used to teach prepositions to ECE learners with autism spectrum disorder. Three common teaching strategies emerged from the narratives of the interviewees: the use of visuals, repetition, and functional learning. Teaching challenges were also identified, namely, students' attention, students' behavior, and language barriers.

Although these challenges pose a threat to the comprehension of learners with autism spectrum disorder, it is a motivator for teachers to explore methods that will enable them to potentially avoid these challenges in the future. It can also be concluded that collaboration between teachers is essential in exploring various teaching strategies that can be employed in the classroom to help ECE learners with autism grasp the concept of prepositions.

The utilization of a qualitative method and narrative research design allowed the researchers to delve into the experiences of educators that handled ECE learners with ASD. It gave a clear image of their teaching strategy and understanding of the necessary approaches for the absorption of skills for these learners. However, assessment methods were not discussed in the study. It may be beneficial for future studies to look into the different assessment methods that educators use in determining the level of understanding of prepositions.

Recommendations

Future researchers may consider a larger sample size to determine whether the narratives previously mentioned apply to them as well. Additionally, they may opt to utilize observations and immersions for a much more authentic data collection. They may also construct lessons and instructional modules based on their findings that may be supplementary material for teachers handling learners with special needs. In line with that, it is also recommended to coordinate with school administrators to establish a standardized system in the implementation of teaching strategies regarding teaching prepositions to early childhood education learners within the autism spectrum. Further studies may also explore specific curriculums and approaches in teaching prepositions to this group of learners.

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