

Research Article

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# Enhancing Communication Skills in Students with Autism: A UAE Case Study on iPad-Based Interventions

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## Abstract

**Background/purpose.** This study investigates the efficacy of iPad-based interventions in improving communication skills among students with autism, focusing on two participants with minimal functional speech.

**Materials/methods.** A multiple baseline design was employed, consisting of two phases: a baseline phase (A), where the participants had access to an iPad but demonstrated no communicative attempts, and an intervention phase (B), which involved a structured, seven-week training program with bi-weekly sessions. Systematic observations were conducted to measure the frequency of communication attempts and the level of prompting required.

**Results.** Data analysis revealed significant improvements in both participants' ability to initiate requests and engage in verbal interactions using iPad applications. These findings suggest that iPad-based interventions can serve as effective tools for enhancing communication skills in children with autism, providing critical support for their development in academic and social settings.

**Conclusion.** The results underscore the potential of assistive technologies in facilitating meaningful communication for students with autism at schools.



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## 1. Introduction

The integration of technology into educational practices has significantly transformed how diverse learning needs are addressed, offering innovative solutions for students with developmental challenges. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that profoundly impacts communication, social interaction, and behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Alzyoudi et al., 2014). The growing prevalence of ASD has highlighted the critical need for effective and evidence-based intervention strategies. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Ministry of Community Development reported that more than 2,000 individuals with ASD are currently receiving specialized educational services (Ministry of Community Development, UAE, 2017). Communication deficits, encompassing both verbal and nonverbal modalities, pose significant barriers to academic achievement and social integration for these students, underscoring the need for targeted support strategies (Alzarayer & Devender, 2017; More & Travers, 2013).

Traditional Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems have long been employed to support communication development in individuals with ASD. However, advancements in technology, particularly the use of tablet devices such as iPads, have introduced new possibilities for enhancing communication outcomes. Tablets can function as dynamic AAC tools, utilizing visual symbols, images, and text to facilitate communication (Walker & Snell, 2013). These tools align with the strengths of individuals with ASD, who often respond positively to structured and visually consistent formats (Travers & Fefer, 2017). Despite their potential, there remains limited research on the specific impact of tablet-based AAC systems and how they can be optimized for use in diverse educational contexts.

Existing studies suggest that tablet-based AAC interventions can improve functional communication and reduce challenging behaviors in children with ASD (Achmadi et al., 2014; Xin & Leonard, 2014). However, additional research is necessary to explore their effectiveness across varying settings and to identify best practices for their implementation. The selection and application of AAC technologies must be informed by professional expertise to ensure that these tools effectively address the individual needs of students with ASD (McNaughton & Light, 2013). Furthermore, the lack of consensus on implementation strategies highlights the need for systematic research to provide evidence-based recommendations for practitioners and educators.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of iPad-based AAC interventions on the communication abilities of students with autism. Specifically, the study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions, identify the practical benefits and challenges associated with their use, and provide insights for improving their application in educational settings. By addressing these objectives, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on technology-based interventions for individuals with ASD and inform the development of effective communication support strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

The use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems to support individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been widely acknowledged as an essential approach in addressing the significant communication challenges faced by this population. The integration of technology in special education, particularly through devices such as iPads, has emerged as a promising strategy to enhance communication, social interaction, and educational outcomes for students with ASD. The theoretical foundation of this approach is grounded in the principles of visual and interactive learning, which align with the strengths and needs of individuals with ASD (Alzyoudi et al., 2021; Flores et al., 2012; Kagohara et al., 2013).

AAC systems are critical for individuals with ASD, who often experience profound difficulties in both verbal and nonverbal communication. Traditional AAC tools, such as picture exchange systems and manual communication boards, have proven effective in facilitating communication. However, advances in technology have introduced dynamic, customizable tools like iPads equipped with AAC applications. These devices utilize symbols, images, and written text to provide interactive communication platforms tailored to the needs of individuals with ASD (Alzarayer & Devender, 2017; Shane et al., 2012). Such tools are particularly effective for students with ASD, who frequently demonstrate a preference for structured, visually supported learning environments (Travers & Fefer, 2017). Studies have shown that iPads can significantly enhance communication skills, enabling students to express their needs and engage meaningfully in social interactions (Dundon et al., 2013; King et al., 2014).

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting the use of AAC tools, most of the research has been conducted in Western contexts, with limited exploration of their applicability in non-Western cultural settings. While studies in Western countries consistently report positive outcomes associated with AAC interventions, there is a need to understand how cultural differences may influence the implementation and effectiveness of these technologies. For example, research conducted in Saudi Arabia by Alzarayer and Devender (2017) demonstrated that students responded favorably to iPad-based interventions, highlighting the importance of cultural factors in shaping the acceptance and success of AAC tools. This underscores the need for further research to evaluate how AAC interventions can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse populations and educational systems.

The effective use of iPads as AAC devices also presents several practical challenges. Teachers and support staff require adequate training to utilize these tools effectively, and ongoing technical support is necessary to ensure their functionality. Additionally, the financial cost of acquiring, maintaining, and updating iPads and AAC applications can be a barrier to widespread adoption (Light & McNaughton, 2012). Furthermore, successful AAC interventions must be individualized to account for the unique cognitive abilities, preferences, and communication needs of each student (Ronski & Sevcik, 2005).

In addition to improving communication skills, iPads offer broader educational and social benefits for students with ASD. Educational applications on iPads provide immediate feedback, which enhances learning outcomes and increases motivation and engagement (Pilgrim et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2013). Furthermore, studies have shown that iPads can help reduce problematic behaviors and improve social interactions, thereby supporting both academic and social development (Sigafos et al., 2013; Xin & Leonard, 2014).

Comparative research highlights the advantages of iPads and other speech-generating devices (SGDs) over traditional AAC tools. The ability of these devices to produce speech output significantly enhances expressive communication, enabling students to interact more effectively with others (Xin & Leonard, 2014). By facilitating communication and promoting social engagement, iPads play a crucial role in supporting the overall development of students with ASD.

In summary, existing literature demonstrates the potential of iPad-based AAC interventions to improve communication skills and broader developmental outcomes for individuals with ASD. However, there is a pressing need for further research to explore their implementation in diverse cultural contexts and to address the practical challenges associated with their use. This study aims to examine the impact of iPad-based AAC interventions on the communication skills of students with ASD in the UAE, with a particular focus on tasks such as making requests and expressing gratitude. By addressing these issues, this research seeks to contribute to the evidence base for AAC technologies and inform them about their adaptation for use in varied educational settings.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a multiple-baseline design across participants to investigate the effectiveness of iPad-based Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) interventions in enhancing communication skills in children with autism. The multiple-baseline design was selected due to its suitability for evaluating the effect of an intervention over time while controlling for confounding variables. By introducing the intervention sequentially across participants, this design facilitated the identification of causal relationships between the iPad-based intervention and observed communication improvements, thereby ensuring robust internal validity.

#### 3.2. Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative and single-case experimental research to select participants who meet specific inclusion criteria relevant to the research objectives. This approach allowed the selection of participants most likely to benefit from the intervention, ensuring the findings addressed the core aim of evaluating the iPad-based AAC intervention. Participants were selected from a specialized classroom for children with autism in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates. The inclusion criteria ensured homogeneity in the participant group and were as follows:

- A confirmed diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by qualified medical professionals.
- Significant communication deficits, with no functional speech abilities.
- No physical or sensory impairments that would hinder the use of an iPad.
- No prior experience with AAC systems or similar assistive communication devices.

This sampling method ensured that the selected participants represented the target population and that any observed improvements could be attributed to the intervention, rather than external factors such as prior exposure to AAC tools.

#### 3.3. Participants

Two male students meeting the inclusion criteria participated in the study:

Participant A: An eight-year-old boy diagnosed with autism who displayed pronounced delays in communication and social interaction. His school records emphasized the need for targeted interventions to address his communication challenges.

Participant B: A seven-year-old boy with autism, intellectual disabilities, and speech impairments. Participant B primarily relied on nonverbal communication methods, such as gestures and eye gazes, due to severe limitations in expressive and receptive language.

#### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (<https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects/>). All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with these guidelines to ensure ethical integrity and participant welfare. This study did not require ethical approval as it does not involve medical interventions, the collection of sensitive personal data, or any procedures that pose a risk to participants.

### **3.5. Data Collection Method**

Data was collected during two distinct phases: baseline and intervention. The process was designed to evaluate changes in the participants' communication abilities following the introduction of the iPad-based AAC intervention.

- **Baseline Phase:** The baseline phase involved providing participants with access to iPads without structured training or guidance. This phase aimed to establish each participant's existing communication abilities, serving as a control for comparison with post-intervention outcomes.
- **Intervention Phase:** The intervention phase spanned seven weeks, during which participants engaged in two training sessions per week, lasting 15–20 minutes each. The sessions focused on teaching participants to use the iPad's speech-generating device (SGD) application to communicate. The intervention incorporated explicit modeling and prompting strategies to teach participants how to use icons and visual prompts within the application to generate speech. A fading prompt strategy was employed to gradually reduce teacher assistance, encouraging participants to independently use the device for communication tasks, including making requests and responding to questions.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

The effectiveness of the intervention was evaluated using systematic observation and a researcher-designed checklist. Communication attempts were recorded and categorized as either requests (e.g., asking for an object) or responses (e.g., answering a question). Additionally, the level of prompting required during each interaction was recorded, with scores assigned to indicate the degree of teacher assistance. Visual analysis was employed to assess changes in communication patterns between the baseline and intervention phases. This approach allowed for the identification of trends and improvements in communication skills, as well as the evaluation of the intervention's impact on independent device usage.

### **3.7. Validity and Reliability**

To enhance the validity of the findings, data were collected in the participants' natural classroom environment, minimizing disruptions to their routine and ensuring ecological validity. The intervention was aligned with the participants' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to ensure its relevance to their specific communication needs.

Reliability was assessed through inter-rater agreement. Two experienced special education professionals independently reviewed and coded the data using the observation checklist. The inter-rater agreement was calculated at 0.90, indicating a high degree of consistency between observers. This methodological rigor ensured the reliability and reproducibility of the study's findings.

## **4. Results**

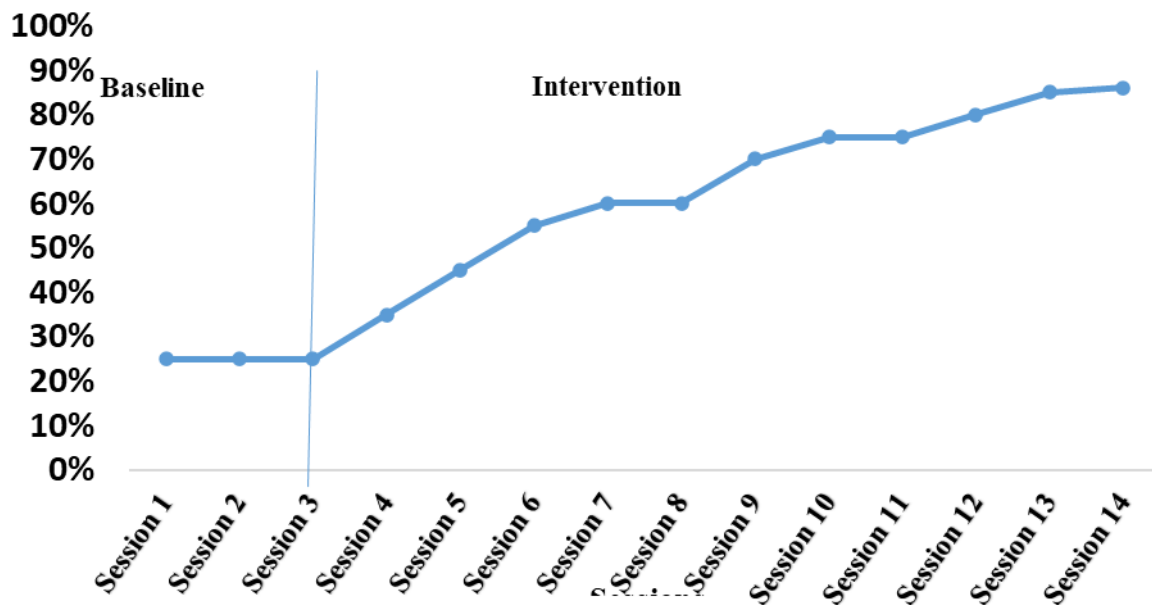
The study aimed to evaluate the impact of iPad-based interventions on the communication skills of students with autism. The results indicate significant improvements in the communication abilities of both participants. The findings are presented for each participant separately to ensure clarity and to maintain adherence to ethical considerations.

### **4.1. Participant A**

Figure 1 illustrates the performance of Participant A across 14 sessions, divided into baseline and intervention phases. During the baseline phase, Participant A's performance was variable, with an average accuracy rate of approximately 50%. This variability likely reflects initial unfamiliarity with both the iPad and the tasks, contributing to inconsistent responses.

In the intervention phase, Participant A demonstrated a clear and significant improvement in communication skills. By the third session, Participant A met the acquisition criteria and displayed steady progress. This trend suggests that the iPad-based intervention effectively enhanced Participant A's ability to perform speech-based tasks, including making requests and expressing gratitude. The upward trajectory observed during the intervention phase highlights the intervention's impact on improving communication reliability and consistency.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of Correct Responses for Participant A

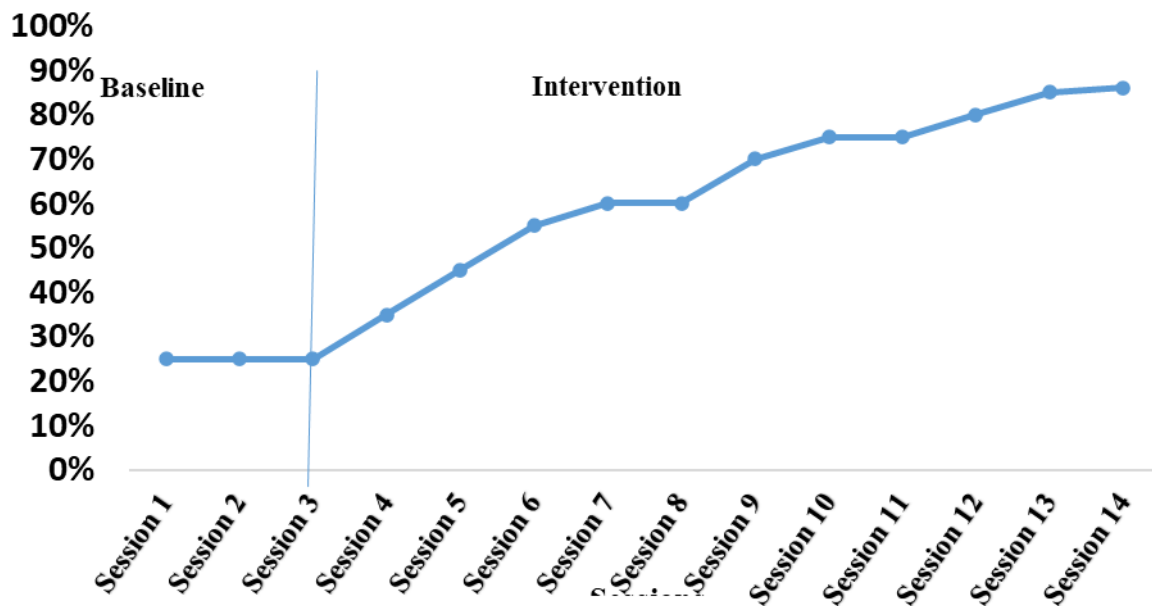


#### **4.2. Results for Participant B**

Figure 2 illustrates the performance of Participant B across 14 sessions, divided into baseline and intervention phases. During the baseline phase, Participant B's performance was inconsistent, with an average accuracy rate of approximately 20%. This low level of performance likely reflects initial unfamiliarity with the iPad and the communication tasks, contributing to variability in responses.

In the intervention phase, Participant B demonstrated significant improvements in communication skills, although progress was initially slower compared to Participant A. By the third session, Participant B met the acquisition criteria and continued to show steady improvement throughout the intervention phase. Despite the slower initial progress, the upward trend observed in the intervention phase highlights the effectiveness of the iPad-based intervention in fostering communication development. Participant B's increasing ability to use the iPad for communication tasks underscores the potential of the intervention to support communication growth, even for individuals with initial challenges.

Figure 2. Percentage of Correct Responses for Participant B



The results demonstrate that both participants, despite differing baseline performance levels and rates of progress, achieved significant improvements in communication skills following the iPad-based intervention. This highlights its effectiveness in fostering functional communication development across varying levels of initial ability.

## 5. Discussion

This study offers empirical support for the efficacy of iPad-based interventions in enhancing communication skills among children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The results demonstrate that integrating iPad applications into communication training led to substantial improvements in the participants' abilities to perform functional communication tasks, such as making requests and expressing gratitude. During the baseline phase, both participants relied heavily on non-verbal methods of communication, indicative of significant limitations in spontaneous verbal expression. However, following the introduction of the iPad-based intervention, the structured design of the applications, which incorporated visual aids, auditory prompts, and interactive features, was instrumental in facilitating notable advancements in communication. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the benefits of technology-enhanced interventions in supporting communication development for children with ASD (Kagohara et al., 2013; Lancioni et al., 2015).

The outcomes of this study underscore the capacity of iPad-based AAC interventions to address core communication challenges in children with ASD. The structured and visually engaging nature of the iPad applications appeared to play a pivotal role in maintaining the participants' attention and promoting skill acquisition. The rapid progress observed in Participant A compared to the slower, yet steady, improvements in Participant B highlights the importance of tailoring interventions to the individual learning needs and paces of children with ASD. This observation reinforces prior findings that advocate for personalized therapeutic approaches in autism interventions (Kasari et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the integration of speech-generating devices (SGDs) within the iPad applications provided the participants with an accessible tool to express their needs and intentions, effectively overcoming barriers related to verbal communication. These results support the growing body of literature advocating for the incorporation of assistive technologies as a complement to traditional therapeutic methods in educational and clinical settings for children with ASD.

## 6. Implications and Limitations of the Study

### 6.1. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have significant implications for educators, therapists, and researchers working with children with ASD. The successful implementation of iPad-based interventions highlights their potential as a practical and effective tool for improving communication skills. This reinforces the need to incorporate such technologies into therapeutic practices and special education programs as a means of providing targeted support for children with complex communication needs.

Moreover, this study extends the application of technology-enhanced interventions beyond Western contexts by demonstrating their effectiveness in a collectivist cultural setting, such as the UAE. The cultural adaptability observed in this study underscores the global relevance of iPad-based interventions and highlights their potential to address communication challenges in diverse educational environments.

### 6.2. Limitations of the Study

Despite the promising outcomes, the study is subject to certain limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of children with ASD. Additionally, the study was conducted exclusively in a school environment, which may not fully capture the potential effectiveness of iPad-based interventions in other settings, such as at home or within the community. These contextual constraints highlight the need for further research to explore the broader applicability of such interventions.

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of iPad-based interventions on communication skills in children with ASD. The findings demonstrate that structured iPad applications significantly enhance functional communication abilities, such as making requests and expressing gratitude, in children with ASD. By leveraging interactive, visually supportive technology, the study highlights the potential of iPad-based interventions to support skill acquisition and communication development.

While the study's limitations include a small sample size and a focus on school-based implementation, the findings provide valuable insights into the practical applications of technology-enhanced interventions in autism therapy. Future research should explore broader contexts, cultural adaptability, and the long-term effects of these interventions further to inform their use in diverse educational and therapeutic settings.

## 8. Suggestion

- Future studies should involve larger, more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings across different populations and contexts.
- Research should investigate the application of iPad-based interventions in various settings, including home and community environments, to evaluate their effectiveness in diverse contexts.
- Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess the sustainability of the communication skills developed through iPad-based interventions over extended periods.
- Further investigation into the role of parental involvement and individual participant characteristics is necessary to refine these interventions and optimize their impact.



## Declarations

**Author Contributions.** All authors were involved in the concept, design, collection of data, interpretation, writing, and critical revising of the article. All authors approved the final version of the article.

**Conflicts of Interest.** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Ethical Approval.** This study adheres to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (<https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects/>). All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with these guidelines to ensure ethical integrity and participant welfare. This study did not require ethical approval as it does not involve medical interventions, the collection of sensitive personal data, or any procedures that pose a risk to participants.

**Data Availability Statement.** Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the authors on request

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