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Phatic Communication Through Local Folklore-Based Storytelling for Children with Autism at Woha Special School, Bima, West Nusa Tenggara

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ABSTRACT

This study presents phatic communication in the practice of storytelling using local children's stories with autistic students at SLB Woha, Bima, NTB. The background of this research lies in the low level of social communication engagement among autistic children, which requires a relational rather than purely informational approach. The research aims to understand how the functions of phatic communication initiating, maintaining, and closing social relations are carried out through local story media such as *Kuda Rawa* and *The Legend of Tambora*. The main theoretical framework includes phatic communication theory (Malinowski, Jakobson) and the concept of storytelling as a culturally contextual educational and relational strategy. A qualitative case study method is employed, involving three subject groups: special education teachers, parents of students, and local religious leaders (ustaz). Data collection techniques include participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. Data is analyzed using thematic descriptive analysis. Findings show that phatic communication through storytelling is effective in building emotional connections, enhancing social responses, and fostering a sense of security. Theoretically, the study extends the application of phatic theory in special education; practically, it supports the development of teaching media based on local culture. In conclusion, local storytelling serves not only as an educational tool but also as a social bridge for autistic children in the context of inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

There are still many misconceptions and even stigmatized views about individuals with autism. Autistic behaviors differ from others, such as refusing to be held, crying at night, and sleeping during the day. According to Sepahvandi & Hojjatollah (2019), they often talk to themselves in language incomprehensible to their parents. When angry, they might bite, scratch, pull hair, or act aggressively. Sometimes they laugh as if someone is joking with them. In the past, parents believed such children were "changelings" or switched with fairy children, making them unable to adapt to normal human life.

Budiman (2002) stated that autism is a developmental neurological disorder affecting communication, social interaction, and behavior in children. Children with autism often struggle to understand and use language, follow instructions, and engage with others effectively. Therefore, they require special educational approaches to develop their potential.

SLB (Sekolah Luar Biasa) is a school designed for children with special needs, including autism. According to Biruny (2022), SLB provides inclusive education and supports students' academic, social, and emotional development. Its goal is to create an educational environment that prepares them for social life. According to Indonesian Government Regulation No. 72 of 1991 concerning Special Education, SLB is an educational unit for children with disabilities, typically between the ages of 6 and 12.

One approach used in SLB learning activities is storytelling through local children's books. Aspiana et al. (2021) and Adetya et al. (2021) stated that storytelling is a process involving a narrator and listeners, proven to enhance language skills, imagination, and narrative comprehension in children. Wulandari (2019) emphasized that phatic communication fosters emotional closeness between teachers and students with intellectual disabilities. Through greetings, verbal attention, and eye contact, students become more responsive in learning. Phatic

communication creates a safe and comfortable atmosphere, encouraging active social interaction.

However, every autistic child is unique. Some may respond better to storytelling than others. Therefore, the use of storytelling patterns and phatic communication methods is essential, considering autistic children's needs for joyful interaction. Phatic communication aims to maintain social contact, which is crucial for autistic students who struggle with interaction. Children's stories facilitate such communication using simple language, repetition, and emotional expression. Arifin (2020) found that storytelling integrated with phatic communication improves attention and social response in autistic students.

This study is novel in that it explores the rarely addressed role of phatic communication in maintaining social relationships with autistic students through storytelling of local children's stories. It also critiques the lack of effective communication approaches in SLB, especially in remote areas like Woha-Bima, NTB. The study is significant as it highlights the importance of phatic communication strategies to enhance social interaction among autistic students, integrating aspects of local culture. Its contribution lies in providing a learning model that educators can apply to build emotional and social engagement through local Bima stories. It also enriches inclusive education and communication therapy research within culturally-rooted special education environments.

Therefore, the study aims to identify factors affecting the effectiveness of storytelling using children's stories for autistic students in SLB Woha, Bima. These factors may include children's characteristics, appropriate storytelling techniques, and support from teachers and parents. Understanding the benefits and challenges of implementing children's storytelling activities through phatic communication in autistic students at SLB Woha, Bima will offer valuable insights for developing inclusive education for autistic children in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB). This research is expected to provide practical recommendations for

educators, librarians, and parents on optimizing storytelling with local stories as a joyful communication tool that fosters creativity and local pride in autistic students.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2016) of the practice of phatic communication through storytelling with autistic students at SDLB Woha, Bima, NTB. This approach allows the researcher to explore the meanings, experiences, and perceptions of teachers, parents, and local religious leaders (ustaz) who are directly involved in the communication and educational processes of autistic children.

Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2017). Interviews were conducted with special education teachers, parents of autistic students, and ustaz who guide students' spiritual activities to obtain a holistic perspective. Observations took place during learning and storytelling sessions to directly observe the practice of phatic communication. Documentation consisted of teacher journals, activity photos, and video recordings of classroom sessions, used as supporting data.

The data analysis technique follows the Miles and Huberman (2014) model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of phatic communication and its impact on autistic students.

To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied across sources (teachers, parents, ustaz), techniques (interviews, observation, documentation), and time. Validation was further reinforced through member checking, by confirming findings with informants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations (Moleong, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

A. Phatic Communication Through Storytelling with Autistic Students

In communication with humans particularly autistic students at SLB Woha, NTB not all messages from teachers are intended to convey new information. In fact, most of their daily interactions consist of light utterances such as greetings, small talk, or seemingly unimportant neutral expressions. However, such utterances play a crucial role in building and maintaining social relationships with autistic students.

This is the essence of phatic communication theory, originally introduced by Bronisław Malinowski in 1923 a pivotal concept in linguistics and communication studies that highlights how communication is not only about transmitting information, but also about building relationships. In his work *The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages*, Malinowski (1923) stated, "*Speech is not always primarily about the exchange of thought or information, but often functions to establish bonds of personal union.*" In this view, utterances such as asking how someone is doing, joking, or giving compliments are examples of phatic communication because their purpose is to nurture social connection rather than convey information.

A study by Fachrurrozi and Mahyudin (2019) state that Allah SWT created language to make humans intelligent and happy (phatic), and it can also serve as an adaptive strategy to foster *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), creating a "safe zone" within vulnerable social interactions. Coupland et al. (1992) further suggests that phatic communication can serve as an adaptive strategy to create a "safe zone" in vulnerable social interactions.

The model of phatic communication was later developed and popularized by Roman Jakobson, a structuralist linguist, in 1960. According to Jakobson, phatic communication serves to keep the channel of communication open. In this framework, the phatic function for autistic students in Woha, NTB plays a role in maintaining communication flow whether through physical means (like eye

contact) or verbal cues (such as responses like “yes,” “hmm,” “okay”).

This study refers to several core concepts of phatic communication, including: relational rather than informational goals, opening, maintaining, and closing interactions, use of body language and nonverbal symbols, and adaptability to different media.

- **Relational, Not Informational, Purposes**

Holmes (2013), Jakobson (1960), and Laver (1975) state that phatic communication is not intended to deliver new or complex content. Rather, its goal is to maintain social presence, solidarity, and emotional engagement.

According to **Sarah**, a teacher for mild autism at SLB Woha, regarding the relational goal of communication rather than information:

"When I tell stories, for example about Putri Mandalika or Kuda Rawa, I don't focus on whether the kids understand the content. What matters to me is the moment of interaction. When I tell a story with expressive gestures and lively voice, the kids begin to look at me, laugh, or imitate the sounds. That means they are emotionally present. Storytelling becomes my tool to build trust. Autistic students do not respond like typical children, but through stories, I can slowly enter their world. For me, the social function is more important than the narrative content."

Meanwhile, a parent, Sumarni, shared her perspective on the relational value of local children's stories:

"My son, Faiz, didn't want to speak at all at first. But ever since the teacher started telling stories about the Maleo Bird and the Legend of Tambora, he started mimicking sounds and pointing at pictures. I know he does not fully understand the story yet, but he is more willing to make eye contact and smiles more often. I believe these stories are not just entertaining they help Faiz feel welcomed. We, as parents, do not expect immediate academic improvement, but we are grateful that our child is beginning to 'show up' socially. That's what

we're most thankful for in the storytelling activities at school."

Hasan, a local ustaz (religious teacher) in Woha, NTB, added:

"I often observe storytelling at the school as similar to a form of da'wah (spiritual outreach). Not all autistic children can sit still or understand immediately. But when I saw the teacher tell the story of Prophet Nuh in the local Bima version, the children seemed calm and focused. I realized it's not the story content they absorb, but the peace and affection in the delivery. Storytelling becomes a medium for spiritual connection. Even in Islam, character and closeness come first before knowledge. So, I agree—local stories can be a way to build relationships, not just convey messages."

These statements from the teacher, parent, and ustaz emphasize that storytelling is intended to build emotional bonds rather than deliver information. Findings by Sambak et al. (2021) show that story therapy significantly improves social interaction and language skills in autistic children. Similarly, Maich & the Afirm Team (2015) highlight that using **social narratives** effectively enhances social responsiveness and adaptive communication in children with ASD.

- **Opening, Maintaining, and Closing Interaction**

Phatic communication is often used to open interactions (e.g., “Hello?” “Excuse me”), maintain the flow (e.g., “yes,” “right,” “go on...”), and close the conversation (e.g., “Okay, see you,” “bye for now”) (Jakobson, 1960; Holmes, 2013).

Rina, a language and communication teacher, shared her approach to this pattern:

"Assalamu'alaikum, kids! Want to hear the Kuda Rawa story?' or 'Hello, all my handsome and beautiful kids...!' I start every morning with greetings like that, often changing them up. Then I introduce the story of Kuda Rawa, which they are already familiar with. The goal is not for them to fully grasp the plot, but to make them feel safe and recognized. Children with autism need time to feel comfortable, and through

stories, I build an emotional bridge. I have noticed small changes: they start making eye contact, nodding, or mimicking my voice. That is not just reaction it is a sign of connection. What matters to me isn't whether they remember the characters, but that they are present and willing to engage."

A young mother, Sumarni, also described her experience with her child's engagement:

"When my son talked about his teacher telling the Legend of Tambora, I realized he might not follow the plot or understand the moral lesson. But I keep retelling it at home, because his reactions smiling, turning his head, even sitting closer are far more meaningful than understanding the story itself. That story became my way of emotionally reaching Hafiz. In class, this kind of interaction is invaluable. It is not about teaching facts; it is about building social relationships. I feel like when my child is drawn into the story, it is as if he is saying 'I'm here.' And that's more than enough to start the day."

Hasan, a local *ustaz* in Woha, NTB, shared his thoughts on teaching autistic students through local children's stories:

"Every time I observe the children being told stories about the Maleo Bird from Bima, I don't focus on how much they understand the wisdom or essence of Islam. But when they can retell the story or answer questions, even that is a gift from Allah SWT. Intelligence is not the goal here. I hope teachers use Bima children's stories to make them happy and feel cared for as creations of Allah SWT. Some laugh, some imitate bird sounds, and some begin to come closer. Those are signs that they feel connected and are aware that Allah is moving their hearts. In inclusive classrooms, building stories that are close to nature and Allah SWT is the key. Storytelling becomes the warmest moment of the day not to teach content, but to build relationships. Once a child feels comfortable, learning anything becomes easier."

These three local sources from NTB emphasize that storytelling using local children's tales plays a role in opening interaction (greetings and opening expressions), maintaining engagement (through expressions and non-verbal responses), and closing interaction (ending rituals that provide a sense of security).

Izzah and Leonardi (2025) in their study reported that local-based storytelling aligns with the concept of social stories, which enhance social skills and interpersonal communication in autistic students in Indonesia. Susanti (2019) also found that social stories are effective in modeling the sequence of social situations and instilling expectations and appropriate responses, such as "what should be said."

- **Body Language and Non-Verbal Symbols**

In practice, phatic communication can also be carried out through facial expressions, gestures, or other non-verbal cues such as nodding, smiling, or using emojis in digital communication.

Sari, a teacher in the Inclusive Class (Autism and Slow Learner) at SLB Woha, NTB, explained how body language works in her class:

"When I read the story of Kuda Rawa, I use hand movements, facial expressions, and animal sounds. My autistic students respond more to movement than to words. They clap, mimic the actions, or just laugh. Body language becomes a bridge when words cannot reach them yet. Without saying much, they can still take part in the story."

Meanwhile, a parent, Idrus, shared his perspective on how the teachers at SLB Woha use body language:

"When the teacher uses gestures in class while storytelling, my child is immediately drawn in. He does not understand all the words, but if there are hand movements or funny expressions, he laughs and imitates. At home, he now pretends to move like the birds or tigers from the stories. Body language connects with kids like him more than words ever could."

For the use of body language by SLB Woha teachers, Hasan, the local *ustaz*, stated:

"I noticed that when teachers tell stories using their hands, faces, and animal sounds, autistic children become more focused. They might not be able to respond verbally, but they nod, smile, or follow the movements. That is a sign of engagement. Even in dakwah (Islamic preaching), sometimes the body speaks before the tongue. So, I see body language as very important to reach them emotionally."

These three local informants from NTB indicate that movement and non-verbal expressions like facial gestures and hand signs help autistic children connect emotionally, even if they do not yet understand the words. Safira et al. (2022) show that autistic children communicate desires through facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements. Sismono (2024) also highlighted the importance of joint attention and gestural cues as predictors of language development in children with disabilities, particularly autism.

- Adaptive Use of Media

Pambayun (2013) and Coupland et al. (1992) explain that phatic functions appear across various communication media from face-to-face conversations to phone calls and even social media. For example, in WhatsApp, typing "hehe" or using an emoji is a form of phatic communication that shows involvement without adding literal meaning.

Sarah, an inclusive classroom teacher at SLB Woha, NTB, shared her thoughts on adapting media to suit her autistic students:

"I often modify the storytelling media to fit the needs of autistic children. Sometimes I use puppets, sometimes large images, and once I even used a short video about the Maleo Bird. Flexible media keeps them more engaged. If the media is too rigid, they quickly lose interest or cannot focus. But when I adjust the format and visuals, they pay better attention and show expression. Storytelling must be adaptive, not just reading from a book."

A parent, Idrus, also shared his experience with the media used by teachers at SLB Woha:

"I saw that the teachers at SLB are really creative. When telling the Kuda Rawa story,

they used stick-on pictures and animal sounds from a phone. My child responded immediately, even though he is usually silent. I tried it at home too, and it turns out using pictures works better than just reading. Every autistic child is different, so the storytelling media needs to be flexible. When it's adapted, the child becomes more interested and can learn in their own way."

Similarly, Hasan, the local *ustaz*, commented on media use at SLB Woha:

"I saw that the teachers at SLB are very good at adapting the media during storytelling. Some use posters, recorded sounds, even simple roleplay. During the Legend of Tambora story, the children looked engaged because the media was visual and appealing. Autistic children need gentle and flexible approaches. Even in religion, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) delivered dakwah in ways suitable for his audience. So, adapting storytelling media is crucial for the message to reach their hearts."

These local figures highlight the teachers' creativity in adapting media such as pictures, sounds, and videos to meet the needs of autistic children. Sari and Wibawanti (2019) found that storytelling using visual media significantly increased the social interaction of autistic children ($p = 0.000$). Meanwhile, Maich & the Afirm Team (2015) explain that social narratives presented through visual or multimedia formats effectively enhance adaptive social skills in students with ASD.

DISCUSSION

This study discusses an inclusive school in Woha, Bima Regency, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), where teachers face unique challenges. They teach children on the autism spectrum children who perceive, think, and respond to the world in distinctive ways. Every morning, before beginning the core lessons, the teachers engage in a special ritual that reflects local culture: storytelling. They read simple yet meaningful illustrated local children's stories. But these stories are not merely

about animal characters on adventures or folk tales from the archipelago. For the teachers and their students, these stories become a bridge for communication a way to greet, calm, build trust, and maintain engagement.

This is phatic communication, a concept first introduced by Bronisław Malinowski (1923), who, through his study of indigenous communities, discovered that not all utterances are meant to convey information. Many serve only to maintain familiarity or social connection.

In the world of autistic children especially in Woha, where oral traditions are strong—phatic communication can be a transformative tool for building emotional and social connections. Baron-Cohen (2000) explains that in the context of storytelling for autistic students, the phatic function appears when teachers greet children before reading, observe their expressions to ensure engagement, use intonation or gestures to attract attention, and repeat certain sentences. All these actions do not convey new information but instead help maintain social connection and presence in the interaction.

Through stories, children can begin to recognize patterns of communication and interaction, understand social cause-and-effect, and respond more comfortably. Storytelling is an ideal medium for applying phatic functions due to its nature: structured, consistent, repetitive (repetition is especially helpful), and multimodal (verbal, visual, gestural). In Woha, NTB, local folktales such as the *Legend of Lake Tambora* or the tale of *Kuda Rawa* are used as communication tools in inclusive classrooms. Teachers create moments of communication that go beyond storytelling they become social rituals that strengthen relationships, build routines, and help autistic children understand social expressions indirectly.

The reason storytelling remains vital for children with autism is due to characteristics noted by Shiratake et al. (1984), who found that autistic children often do not display a sense of security when held by their mother in other words, they show abnormal attachment patterns, being indifferent to separation or reunion with their mother or teacher, or

conversely, showing excessive dependence and anxiety. To address and reduce this, SDLB Woha Bima designed a phatic (joyful) storytelling program for its students.

Baron-Cohen et al. (1997) also found that while typically developing toddlers tend to follow the speaker's gaze when hearing new words, only 29.4% of autistic children can map a new word to a new object compared to 79% of typically developing children. This suggests that autistic children are relatively "blind" or unresponsive to the mentalistic meaning of the eyes, which can hinder language development.

Pambayun (2024) explains that both boys and girls with special needs often show abnormal attachment, either displaying detachment from caregivers or, conversely, excessive dependency and anxiety. This is supported by Wijaya et al. (2017), who found that teachers at *Yayasan Peduli Autisme Bali* effectively use unique and tailored communication patterns that significantly enhance the social interactions of autistic children.

Implications: Phatic Communication through Storytelling at SLB Woha Bima

This study highlights four key implications:

a. Improves Language and Communication Skills

According to Ode (2006), storytelling using Muslim children's stories can help autistic children improve their speaking and communication abilities. Through listening and participating in post-story discussions, they can expand their vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and learn better self-expression. Pambayun (2024) adds that from a communication psychology perspective, this also helps them understand sentence structure and appropriate language use.

b. Builds Narrative Understanding

Biruny (2022) notes that autistic children often struggle to understand and follow storylines. Storytelling helps them grasp narrative structures, including plot, characters, and context. Basri et al. (2022)

found that active participation in storytelling helps children develop an understanding of how stories unfold, connect events, and identify narrative patterns.

- c. Enhances Engagement and Participation
Haristiani et al. (2022) state that autistic children often struggle to engage in learning activities. Storytelling allows them to be more engaged and actively participate in the narrative. Hidayah et al. (2017) found that paying attention to the narrator's gestures, tone, and facial expressions helps autistic children focus and engage, thereby improving listening and instruction-following skills.
- d. Improves Emotional and Self-Awareness
Stories often carry themes of emotions and feelings. Through storytelling, autistic children can enhance their understanding of emotions and learn to recognize both their own and others' feelings. Sambak et al. (2021) explain that storytelling helps autistic children manage emotions better and develop the social understanding needed for everyday interaction—supporting their journey toward a well-adjusted future.

This study makes an important contribution to the development of communication approaches for autistic students, emphasizing the relational function through phatic communication. By using local children's stories, the research shows how emotional and cultural connections can be fostered. These findings extend the application of phatic communication theory to special education contexts and encourage the use of adaptive and context-sensitive media in inclusive education—especially in culturally rich areas like Bima, NTB.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that phatic communication through storytelling based on local children's stories significantly helps to initiate, maintain, and sustain social interaction between teachers and autistic students at SLB Woha, Bima,

NTB. The phatic communication function emphasizing presence, attention, and emotional connection is manifested through verbal greetings, eye contact, facial expressions, voice intonation, as well as the use of symbols and body language.

The main findings show that local storytelling does not merely serve to convey information or moral values, but more importantly acts as a relational bridge between teachers and autistic students. Body language and non-verbal symbols such as gestures, facial expressions, and animal sounds used in stories are highly effective in eliciting social responses from autistic students, who typically have limited verbal communication abilities. Additionally, media adaptations (such as images, puppets, videos, and local sounds) make the storytelling process more flexible and tailored to the individual needs of autistic learners. The involvement of parents and local figures (such as religious leaders) further supports the creation of a social environment that is inclusive and culturally familiar.

The study contributes to the expansion of phatic communication theory (Jakobson, Malinowski) into the field of special education, particularly for children with special needs like autism. It demonstrates that phatic functions can be strengthened through local cultural elements and adaptive media, not just verbal messages.

This study supports the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy that fosters emotional safety, trust, and connectedness. Teachers can use local folklore as an initial medium for social interaction before transitioning into academic content crucial for students with communication barriers. Recommendations, special schools and inclusive schools should develop curricula or programs centered on local culture-based storytelling, focusing on enhancing relational communication; teachers and educational staff need special training on using adaptive media and applying phatic communication approaches in special education contexts; local governments and education departments are encouraged to support the development of autism-friendly local children's story materials, involving

cultural and religious leaders in content creation; overall, storytelling with a phatic and local wisdom-based approach is proven to be an inclusive and transformative strategy in the education of autistic children.

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