

**English language teaching for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) learners during pandemic era**

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**Abstract**

An Autistic child is a child who has special needs and developmental disorders. Therefore, in the teaching learning process, teachers who teach ASD learners need to have some knowledge of students' needs. The objections of this study are to explain the implementation of English language teaching for ASD learners during the pandemic era and parents' role in helping ASD learners understand English. This research employed qualitative research. The researchers applied observation, depth interview and documentation in data collection. The results showed that 1) the English language teaching process for ASD at RBA during the pandemic era applied offline and online learning mode. The material of English language teaching for ASD learners was based on the level of ASD diagnosis. The teachers used direct method, TPR, and Lexical method in offline learning, but for online learning, they used Direct and lexical methods. The teachers also utilised pictures or flashcards in offline learning whereas for online learning they gave the students worksheets and did a video call. In giving assessment, the teachers carried out anecdotal notes, checklists, interviews, and retelling stories 2) During the pandemic era, the role of ASD parents was to accompany their child at home pronouncing English vocabularies that had been given by the therapist at RBA. On the other hand, in on-line learning, the role of parents was as a teacher/therapist who gave treatment to their children at home based on therapists' instructions.

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## INTRODUCTION

All human beings were born with equal rights. Regardless of their disabilities, *Children with Special Needs* (CSN) have the same right to be loved, to start their own family, to have access to good education, and live a normal healthy lifestyle (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014). CSN are individuals who have different characteristics from other individuals in general, alike physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Therefore, CSN learners need more attention in the learning process either from their teacher, their parents, and their environment. As stated (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014), CSN learners are "deserved to be given the chance to grow, develop and enchanted". Hence, they need treatment, education, caregiving, and support to improve their abilities to get their future.

An autistic child, or we called it *Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)* is one of the CSN who has developmental impairment. ASD is a child who has neuro-developmental disorders represented on a continuum of severity and marked by repetitive/restricted behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2012). ASD learners usually also have difficulties interacting and communicating with their society. They are different from other children in developing individuals, learn something or remember things. Besides, their memory is often void of contextual details that situate past events in a particular place and time in personal history (Bowler, et al., 2011) and they often find it difficult to spontaneously recall information without aids for retrieval (Bowler, et al., 2004)

Because of the difference with normal children in general, ASD learners need to join early intervention services programs to help and support those children with developmental delays or any other specific health condition (World Health Organization, 2012). Those programs are called as therapists. The importance of intervention services programs is introducing language for ASD learners to communicate with their environment. One of the examples of therapists is speech therapy. There are many scientific studies reported that such programs showed positive feedbacks on the children from different perspectives (Batool & Ijaz, 2015). Therapists give a treatment to pronounce and imitate some words patiently until they can speak it well. In addition, the speech therapy services also can improve the interpersonal skills, psychological well-being of the children (Roulstone et al., 2012).

This research aims to explain the implementation of English language teaching for ASD learners during the pandemic era and parents' role in helping ASD learners understand English. The author realizes that teaching English to ASD learners is not easy. It is more challenging than teaching English to normal children and in normal conditions. Based on the research of Minsih (2021) found that the learning problem of ASD in the pandemic era can be broken down into three factors, namely 1) teacher factor, 2) parents factor and, 3) environment factor. ASD teachers should know about the students' needs. Dewi (2019) stated that they should be required to have more competencies for teaching ASD than teaching normal children. They have to be required to understand the needs of the ASD so that they can design, implement and evaluate the ASD teaching and learning process properly.

Some researchers tried to find better methods to teach English for ASD. The methods used in teaching ASD can be done in the form of prompts, lectures, discussions, and Q&A. A result of the research explored that teaching English can be delivered by using direct method, total physical response (TPR), and lexical approach (Dewi, 2019). But since the teaching-learning process used online learning, parents have important roles in their success of learning. Although many people think that English is not important to be taught to ASD, the focus of learning English for ASD learners is on how far they can learn new things. In addition, it is done as an effort to prepare ASD learners before being included in inclusive schools or public schools.

Parents also have an important role to help ASD learners understand English. As stated by Meleady (2020), previous research has suggested that parents can experience positive contributions as the result of raising a child with the autism spectrum. Qualitative (e.g., Beighton & Wills, 2017; Corman, 2009; Huws, et al., 2001; King, et al., 2012; Gray, 1994; Markoulakis, et al., 2012) and quantitative (e.g., Altieri & von Kluge, 2009; Bayat, 2007; Benson, 2010, 2014; Griffith, et al., 2010) studies of parents with ASD children, including autism, have found that these parenting experiences have some benefits for their children, especially for their personal growth.

Since the government informed that all schools have been closed because of the Corona virus, so the teaching-learning process must be done through online learning. But it is difficult for the students to adapt to this situation as well as for ASD learners. There are some problems facing by ASD learners when they are learning during the Covid-19 pandemic era. Because of that reason, any schools still apply online and offline teaching-learning processes. Rumah Belajar Anak (RBA) is a

private institution that serves the learning guidance and therapy for children with special needs. Every child who learns there must be diagnosed first by the therapist to get the suitable program of treatments for learning and practicing. Fitri (2005, in Ginanto, 2010) stated that the emphasis in teaching English to children with autism is not the benefits of learning the language; but more to the extent to which ASD can receive any materials. Based on those explanations, the research questions are 1) How do the ASD teachers do the implementation of English teaching for ASD learners during the pandemic era? and 2) What are the roles of ASD parents in guiding their children to learn English during the pandemic era?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The design of this research is qualitative research with a descriptive approach. The researcher used this design to answer the research questions. The source of data was taken from the document of the school and interviews of teachers and parents. The document which was needed such as the list of ASD programs, the students' achievement, identities of students and parents, and teachers' note about the development of ASD learners.

The setting of this research is in Rumah Belajar Anak (RBA). It is located in Melati Lor, Gang Kauman Rt 02/Rw 02 No. 187 Kudus. RBA is a private institution which serves the learning guidance and therapy for students who have special needs. But in this research, the researcher just focuses on the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) learners. Teaching ASD learners are challenging because they do not have the abilities to learn with their environment, such as imitation skills, following orders, joint attention, and so on. Each of ASD learners has his own treatment programs based on the result of his diagnosis. In giving education and therapy, each of ASD is handled by one teacher. Therefore, the subject of this research is the head institute of RBA, classroom teachers, parents, and ASD learners.

The data collection was observation, documentation, and interviews. The first step to collect data was observation. The researcher observed the therapist doing a diagnosis to the autistic children. From that diagnosis, the therapist arranged the programs which should be given to the ASD learners. The second step was documentation. To get the data, the researcher needed some documentation like the list of teachers' notes about treatment programs and the assessment results of the treatment. The last step was interview. The interview was done through semi-structured interviews. It was collected as "one of the qualitative data collection techniques (Creswell, 2013). There are 3 interviewees, the head and the therapist of RBA, an English teacher at RBA and a ASD parent. To answer the parents' role in English learning for ASD, the researcher used online interview with the representative of ASD parents. To obey the social distancing rules, the researcher just did one time directly interview and the rest of the interview process was done through some online interviews. The online interviews were held by using phone calls and WhatsApp message, which made it easier to utilize the space and time flexibility provided by the Internet (Crabtree, 1999; Markham, 2004) The interviews were carried out between June 1 to June 19, 2021.

During the teaching-learning process, the researcher recorded the ASD activities and wrote some special notes or new findings. The researcher also conducted the data from the ASD parents to get the data about their role during their children learning English at home. The triangulation techniques were implemented by confirming the result of observations through interviews and analyzing school documents. Dealing with analysing the data, the researcher focused on the implementation of English language teaching for the ASD during the pandemic era such as the material, method, media, and assessment.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **English language teaching during the pandemic era**

Since the pandemic era, the tutoring and therapy class at Rumah Belajar Anak (RBA) are divided into 2 classes of treatment, namely regular treatment and full-day treatment. The class for regular treatment only lasted for 2 hours a day and the class for full day treatment was held for 8 hours a day. The teaching-learning process in RBA was done by face-to-face and online learning. ASD parents might choose one of those teaching-learning processes based on their wants and the condition of their children. Every ASD who wanted to learn and get therapy at RBA, he/she should be diagnosed first by therapist. After he had been diagnosed, therapist gave him treatment programs which might be done during the treatment. Therefore, the treatment program for each of ASD was different. One therapist/teacher only handled one ASD. As stated before that all ASD activities in a day were

monitored by teachers. From that daily assessment, the therapist knew the development of his/her developmental impairment.

Based on that interview of RBA, this research aims to explain the implementation of English language teaching for ASD learners who learned at RBA during the pandemic era and the role of ASD parents in improving English. The results of this research will be explored below.

*Material*

**Table 1. The results of the interview about English material given to ASD Learners**

Material	<p><i>"I always do observation first to get the diagnosis of ASD learners before I arranged target programs. Each of ASD is different based on their developmental impairment" (Therapist)</i></p> <p><i>"I arranged the English teaching programs to introduce them English vocabulary" (Therapist)</i></p> <p><i>"I introduce English vocabulary based on the grade of ASD learners which arrange by therapist" (teacher)</i></p> <p><i>"After ASD learners can mention and understand Indonesian words correctly then I introduce them in English" (teacher)</i></p> <p><i>"Bu Vina gives some words in Indonesian and also in English" (Parent)</i></p> <p><i>"I ask my child to repeat some words in Indonesian and English according to the guidance of therapist" (Parent)</i></p>
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Based on interview in the table 1, the process of English teaching for ASD learners at RBA was based on the result of development impairment diagnosis. A therapist did observation to ASD learners first to diagnose their developmental impairment. By looking at the ASD diagnosis result, the therapist arranged a list of treatments program based on their needs and abilities. Therefore, each ASD learners had different program for the treatments. An English teacher gave the introduction of English vocabularies after ASD learners mentioned and understood some words in Indonesian perfectly. The words which had been introduced by teachers were the same words between Indonesian and English. Hopefully, ASD learners understood some words using Indonesian first than English because the environment of ASD learners communicated with Indonesian language. Therefore, English language teaching in RBA just gave ASD learners the introduction of English vocabularies. Fitri (2005, in Ginanto, 2010) stated that the emphasis in teaching English to ASD was not based on the benefit of learning the language; but the focus was to make ASD learners receive new materials. There was no exception for ASD learners to be able to know mathematics and even English. In line with Fitri (2005, in Ginanto, 2010) argued that "ASD learners were unique, so the problem was not whether or not English was useful for them, but the problem was when they learned English (of course according to the needs and abilities of each child), and how English affect ASD. ASD learners who had good English verbally felt very happy when they learnt English, especially when they could pronounce English vocabularies very well.

The materials were based on the level of ASD needs and abilities. According to Engle et al as cited in (World Health Organization, 2012) said that "the early intervention programs could enhance the children's development and make them be able to follow well and be effective in the future schooling". The materials of English language teaching for ASD learners used at RBA can be shown in the following table:

**Table 1. The example of English material at RBA**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Material</b>
<b>Basic</b>	<p>a. Identification the name of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Colours</li> <li>- Numbers</li> <li>- Alphabets</li> </ul> <p>b. Imitating words and arranging syllables</p>
<b>Intermediate</b>	<p>. Identification the name of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- fruits</li> <li>- Animals</li> <li>- Name of days</li> </ul>

<b>Advance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Arranging words</li> <li>. Identification the name of:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- transportation</li> <li>- Occupation</li> </ul> </li> <li>. Arranging sentence</li> </ul>
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Each of ASD learner who had not been able to pronounce and understand the material well, he/she would not be leveled up. They needed to repeat the same materials, for the next meeting, and so on. This treatment was done to help ASD learners to practice their speaking. Teachers just focused on their pronunciation and their vocabulary mastery. Many scientific studies reported that such programs showed positive feedback on the children in different perspectives (Batool & Ijaz, 2015). One of the examples of the programs was speech therapy. The therapist gave a treatment to pronounce and imitate some words patiently until they can speak it well.

*Method*

Table 2. The results of the interview about methods in teaching English

Method	<p><i>“We use various methods in teaching English language, for example direct method, lexical methods and Total Physical Response (TPR)” (Therapist)</i></p> <p><i>“I always give treatment by TPR method because it can make ASD learners imitating what I said easily” (Therapist)</i></p> <p><i>“But in online learning, I use direct method. ASD learners can practice by imitating the right pronunciation in English (therapist)</i></p> <p><i>“I use direct methods in teaching English. I pronounce or use multiple examples of words or concepts, then ASD practice and repeat those words correctly.” (teacher)</i></p> <p><i>“We can do that by video call” (teacher)</i></p>
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The method of English teaching for ASD learners in RBA was by using direct method, lexical methods and Total Physical Response (TPR). In offline learning, teachers/therapists at RBA used all those methods, but in online learning, they only used direct method. By using direct method, ASD learners practiced English words by imitating the right pronunciation in English. The therapist showed or used multiple examples of words or concepts, then ASD practiced and repeated those words correctly. The repetition was needed to ensure comprehension since there was no translation being used at all. The use of direct methods in English language teaching activated the students’ learning awareness and engaged students to know more the meaning of the words he/she learnt and how to use them. The results of the study showed that all of students both with low and high abilities could easily learn the materials if the teaching method was direct method. By applying direct methods, it eased the learning process from the simple to the complex and from the real to the abstract (Dewi, 2019). For the implementation of Total Physical Response (TPR), the teaching-learning process could be done not only by repetition, but also by applying body movements and body language. This method was simple and easy to apply in English teaching. ASD teachers and learners were also pleased to use TPR method. These activities could improve the students’ ability to master vocabularies. Activities using lexical method were carried out by learning a word or sentences as full context or vice versa through lexical pieces. The use of this lexical approach was done by using short story, which helped students to learn in natural language. The research of Dewi (2019) said that “The teaching methods that could be used for ASD learners were prompts, lectures, discussions and question and answer. Whereas teaching English could be delivered by applying direct method, total physical response (TPR), and lexical approach”.

*Media*

Table 3. The results of the interview about media in teaching English

Media	<p><i>“Actually, we have many media to support teaching learning process from donation, but many of them have broken by ASD learners when they are tantrum” (Therapist)</i></p> <p><i>“I always ask to the teacher to be creative to make her own media simply and harmless for ASD learners” (Therapist)</i></p> <p><i>“The teachers prepared some worksheets to be done by ASD learners at home”. (Therapist)</i></p> <p><i>“I use pictures/flash cards to facilitate matching tasks. I ask to my students to match those charts with same form objects in activities to simplify ASD learners decoding the information” (Teacher)</i></p>
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*“To make the students complete tasks, the teacher gave examples through both verbal and non-verbal instruction and asked student to do the same by himself” (Teacher)*  
*“The teachers prepare some worksheets to be done by ASD learners at home. (Teacher)*  
*“During the pandemic, I always take worksheets at RBA to be done by my child at home and collect it in a week”. (Parent)*  
*“When my child is not tantrum, I call his teacher to get treatment by using video call (Parent)*

By using media, English learning is more interesting and understandable. The media can be used to deliver all the materials and used as a form of instruction and facilitator for learners to reach instructional objectives easily. Media used in teaching English at RBA is picture and flash card. Teachers used pictures/flash card to facilitate matching tasks. They were presented with same form objects in activities to simplify ASD learners decoding the information. According to Kellems, et al., (2018) the pictures are effective visual stimuli that act as facilitator for student to complete an entire task. The teacher used pictures in facilitating matching and writing tasks to simplify the students in completing the tasks. To make the students complete tasks, the teacher gave examples through both verbal and non-verbal instruction and asked student to do the same by himself. Throughout the observation, all of teachers at RBA used pictures because it was more effective and harmless in facilitating ASD learner to complete tasks and learn something through the process. Besides, it was because pictures greatly helped students to recall their visual memory. In short, pictures were effective for ASD learners because they were taken from videos. Moreover, it could be used for many purposes including supporting the students in finishing the tasks. The teachers also prepared some worksheets to be done by ASD learners at home. The teachers prepared some worksheets to be done by ASD learners at home. The teacher asked the parents to collect the worksheet in a week or in a month. However, teacher usually suggested to the parents to collect them in a week, because it was easier for therapist to check and know the development of ASD learners. In giving therapy, teachers used video calls as an alternative platform to stay connected to their students and give the students opportunities to study. From the parents’ information, the teacher knew about the condition of the ASD learners that they were not in bad mood (tantrum), so the teacher could call them via a video call.

*Assessment*

Assessment was done by evaluating English the teaching-learning process for ASD learners at RBA. They were not only evaluated the teaching-learning process by looking at the result of learning English but also the process of learning it. Some methods of evaluation were done in a form of checklists and interviews. Related to the evaluation, it did not only focus on the students’ abilities but also students’ language skills which supported them in using English functionally and contextually. Dewi’s research (2019) proposed that “teachers were required to have more competence in ASD teaching than teaching children in general, for example a teacher was required to be able to understand the needs of the ASD learner so that they were able to design, implemented and evaluated the ASD teaching and learning process properly”. The example of final assessment of ASD learner in RBA can be seen in Table 4 below:

Table 4. The assessment of Student MMM

Material Program	Indicator	LEVEL 3					Notes
		Daily Assessment	Test	Average	Passing Grade	Result	
Education	Language	80	80	80	60	Very good	The student was able to read sentences, recognize the ending -ng.
	Reading Sentences	95	95	95	60	A	The student was able to mention the materials given very well.
	Identify suffix -ng, -ny	80	80	80	60	B	The student was able to mention the materials given very well.
	Word recognition in English	90	90	90	60	A	The student was able to mention the materials given very well.
	Fruits, animals, name of days	72	75	73,5	60	B	The student was able to complete the words/ phrases/ sentences given very well
	Composing words/ syllables	80	85	82,5	60	B	The student was able to identify the words well

Table 4 is the example assessment of student MMM who got a category of test, level 3. He got English language educational program about introduction of fruits, animals, and name of days.

Teacher gave him final score 90 because he mentioned vocabularies in English correctly and understood those vocabularies perfectly, even though the places and words were reversed. Below is the final example of assessment from student MFM. It can be shown in Table 5 below:

Table 5. The Assessment of Student MFM

Material Program	Indicator	LEVEL 1					
		Daily Assessment	Test	Average	Passing Grade	Result	Notes
Education	<b>Language</b>						
	Introduction in English	50	50	50	60	Not good	The student was not able to identify parts of body.
	Color	65	75	75	60	Sufficient	The student was good enough in identifying colors.
	Letter	55	60	57,5	60	Sufficient	The student was not good enough in mastering the materials and needed more practice.
	Number	45	55	50	60	Sufficient	The student was not able to identify numbers and animals.
	<b>Matching</b>						
	Color	70	75	72,5	60	Good	The student was able to match the color.
	Things/ Shopping	65	70	67,5	60	Sufficient	The student was good enough but still needed more practice.

MFM is one of the learners of ASD at RBA. He learns English in basic level. He learnt about introducing colour, alphabets, and numbers in English. He still needed treatment or practice in mentioning English vocabularies. From that assessment in six months, it could be seen that the treatment of English language as foreign language for ASD needed more time.

**Parents’ role in English Learning During Pandemic Era**

Table 5. The results of the interviewed about the role of ASD Parents in English Learning During Pandemic Era

Parents’ role	<p>“ASD parents do not accompany their children at school because they don't have the heart to see their child crying continuously so that the child’s dependence of his/her parents is higher.” (Therapist)</p> <p>“During pandemic, parents have important role to do their own treatment to their child at home” (Therapist)</p> <p>“ASD parents should accompany their child to do some activities according to the worksheet which I give to them (Therapist)</p> <p>“Actually we give a chance to the parents to look at the teaching-learning process, because it can give them knowledge of how to face ASD when they are in tantrum and how to solve it. But in fact, the parents do not want to do it. They trust us”. (Teacher)</p> <p>“I always delivered what has been done by Faza during school. Therefore, the parents will know the development of their child” (Teacher)</p> <p>“I need more extra patience to ask my child to do the treatment activities like mentioning some vocabularies in English. Because of her lack of English pronunciation, she cannot give the example to pronounce the words in English well”. (Parent)</p> <p>“We do our own treatments ourselves to our child at home. (Parent)</p> <p>“Although I have found how to pronounce the English word, I still have difficulties to pronounce it correctly” (Parent)</p>
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Based on the result of this research, parents had the important role to improve the development of ASD learners. The success of ASD learners depended on the strength and patience of their parents. The acceptance of the presence of family members with a diagnosis of autism syndrome was a form of resilience and support for the progress of growth, affection, and education given by parents (Hartati, 2019). According to Farmer & Reupert, (2013), there were significant increases in parental understanding of autism and understanding of their own child, and in understanding communication, sensory, social, learning and behavioural features of autism. Parents valued learning about the general nature of autism and sensory processing and reported feeling less alone. The role of ASD parents in English learning at RBA was based on interview. It could be described as follows:

*Face to face learning*

All ASD parents did not accompany their children to get therapy. Based on the interview with the headmaster of RBA, she said that it was done because many of parents did not have the heart to see their child crying continuously since the child’s dependence of his/her parents was higher. Although all ASD parents at RBA did not accompany their children, the teachers always delivered the

assessment in the same day. Mrs. U, one of RBA teacher said that she always delivered what had been done by MFM during school. Therefore, the parents knew the development of their children. Sridevi & Arya, (2014) said that it was clear that the families usually would be exposed to the knowledge and abilities in handling their children by attending the program and they would be able to practice the knowledge at their home.

Hardiono (2020) argued that it was better for the parents of ASD learners to accompany their children in doing therapy so that they could practice themselves at home. He did not like if there was therapist gives treatment to ASD by closing the door and not allowing the parents accompany their children in the room. That is why the role of the ASD parents was important because it gave them knowledge how to face ASD when they were in tantrum and how to solve it. From the study, Sridevi, & Arya, (2014) explained that “it is helpful for a mother in handling the child when the parental counselling is provided by giving detailed information and knowledge about the disorder and ways to deal with the child. It is clear that the families will usually be exposed to the knowledge and abilities in handling their children by attending certain programs and they will be able to practice the knowledge at their home”.

#### *Online learning*

The long pandemic of Covid-19 had resulted in the limited time of therapy because therapy at treatment service facilities cannot be carried out as before. To prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, therapist and parent had restricted their direct contact physically. They chose to keep their health by staying at home. In this case, the role of ASD parents was very important as the primary caregivers for ASD children in the intervention process. This approach can be used to anticipate the limited time of interventions due to the pandemic. Based on the interview of one of ASD parents at RBA said that they did their own treatment to their children at home. They accompanied their children to do some activities according to the worksheet they got from therapists. BM said that she needed extra patience to ask her child to do the treatment activities like mentioning some vocabularies in English. Because of her lack of English pronunciation, she could not give the example to pronounce the words in English well. Although, she had found how to pronounce the English word, she still had difficulty to pronounce it. As Ardiyani, et al., (2020) said, parents can also take the role of coach or therapist in various interventions.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Rumah Belajar Anak (RBA) is one of informal schools which give treatment programmes to help and prepare ASD learners before being included in inclusive schools or public schools. During the pandemic era, teaching/therapy of English at RBA was done by face to face and online learning. The material which was taught based on the level of each ASD learner. There were three levels in learning English at RBA, namely basic, intermediate, and advanced. In offline learning, English language teaching for ASD learners were done by direct method, TPR and lexical method. But in online learning, teachers at RBA used direct method and lexical method. Teachers at RBA used pictures and flash cards as their media in offline teaching and used worksheets and video call in online teaching. They also used anecdotal notes, checklists, interviews, and retelling stories to assess the activities of ASD learners.

Parents have important roles to accompany the development of ASD learners. During the pandemic era, the role of ASD parents was to accompany their children at home in practising English pronunciation and making use of vocabularies which had been given by the therapist at RBA. The other hand, in online learning, the role of parents was as a teacher/ therapist who gave treatment to their children at home. They did the treatment based on therapists' instructions which were written in worksheet. Hopefully, the teaching of English is not only to fulfil the demands of the rights of ASD learners, but also it can provide satisfaction for them. Therefore, it is hoped that fun language learning can be used as an additional therapy to heal autism.

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