CHAPTER ONE  INTRODUCTION

1.1  INTRODUCTION

There are about 12000 children with autism in Malaysia. The number of registered children with autism is gradually increasing. This is because more parents are becoming aware of this disorder and are seeking treatment whereas formerly the child was left to its own devices. Certain disorders such as learning disabilities and eating disorders can be more successfully treated than others. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV, 1995) the most difficult disorders to be treated are mental retardation and autism.

Children diagnosed with autism exhibit some type of language deficit, the most common being the failure to learn to communicate in the normal manner. Thus, they are unable to cater to their needs. Acquisition of communicational skills can help children with autism become fairly independent. Currently, the emphasis of special education has shifted to teaching communicational skills so that the children with autism can become more independent and then be assimilated into society.

1.1.1  COMMUNICATION

Communication is the central fact of life. We constantly communicate with others in order to make changes in the social system, establish personal bonds, and successfully manage conflict and personal rewards and also to accomplish mutual goals. The entire social system is the creation of communication. An individual who is unable to communicate will be faced with an unconquerable drawback in the modern world if he/she does not possess knowledge in the many facets of this complex accomplishment. Voluntarily or involuntarily he/she has to get involved in the communication process in order to function in the society.
Effective communication involves the ability to use receptive and expressive skills; respond to the perception of the speaker's intent behind their utterances rather than to the literal or surface meaning; understand and use the rules of turn-taking; follow through a series of interchanges; recognise the need to supply pre-suppositional information to the listener; continuously repair communicational breakdowns such as misunderstandings or confusions, and the possession of world knowledge. An effective communicator will be able to express these skills by using verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. A disturbance in any one area can cause communication disorder. Autism is one childhood disorder where all aspects of communication are impaired.

1.1.2 AUTISM

Autism occurs in approximately 15 out of every 10000 births and is 4 times more common in boys than in girls. It is distributed throughout the world in families of all racial, ethnic and social backgrounds. Autism can occur by itself or in association with other handicaps such as mental retardation, learning disabilities, Down Syndrome and epilepsy. Autism is considered as a disability on a continuum from mild to severe. The number of other handicaps present together with autism and the degree of mental retardation will determine the location on that continuum.

The location on the continuum, on the other hand will determine the characteristics exhibited by autistic children. Severely autistic children do not develop meaningful language so they are unable to participate in social conversations. Instead, they engage in echolalia, the act of repeating language heard in the speech of others. They have difficulty comprehending and being understood, exhibit hyperactivity or unusual passivity in relating to parents, family members or other people. Severe behaviour problems in the form of highly unusual aggressiveness and/or self injurious may also be present. Whereas, autism in its milder form resembles a learning disability. However,
children who are even mildly affected are substantially handicapped due to deficits in the areas of communication and socialization. These deficits can be overcome to a certain degree through specialized intervention programmes with highly trained teachers.

Children with autism were thought to be ineducable so they were placed in long-stay mental-handicap institutions. Their lack of progress was taken as proof of their ineducability. But according to Baron-Cohen and Bolton (1994) very few, if any children are ineducable, whatever their intelligence level is. Furthermore, they state that,

"...education should be tailored to the individual, and the educability is evident in progress made, whatever its rate."

(Baron-Cohen & Bolton, 1994:60).

According to the Autism Society of America (1995),

autism "... is considered treatable: indeed a wide variety of treatments, therapies and techniques are claimed to help (or even cure) people with autism, and new ones are invented regularly."

(Green et al., 1988:32).

One such treatment based on behaviour therapy is ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis). Proponents of this method, Anderson et al.,(1987); Birnbrauer et al.,(1993); Fenske et al.,(1985). Harris et al.,(1991); Lovaas,(1987); Maurice,(1993); McEachin et al.,(1993); Perry et al.,(1995) state that,

"...early, intensive instruction using methods of ABA – can result in dramatic improvements for children with autism; successful integration in regular schools for many; completely normal functioning for some."

(Green et al.,1988:33).

Green (1988) states that ABA can produce comprehensive and lasting improvements in many important skill areas for most autistic people regardless of their age.

The ABA programme views autism as a behavioural deficit and an excesses syndrome that has a neurological basis, but nonetheless amenable to changes in response to specific carefully programmed constructive interactions with the environment. Harris
et al. (1994); Koegel et al. (1995); Lovaas et al. (1989); Schreibmann et al. (1993) state that.

"Extensive research has shown that children with autism do not learn readily from typical environment, but many can learn a great deal given appropriate instruction."

(Green et al., 1988:34)

ABA focuses on teaching small measurable units of behaviour systematically. Every skill, be it simple or complex is broken into small steps before being presented with a specific instruction. Appropriate responses are followed by reinforces whereas problematic ones are explicitly not reinforced. Teaching trials are repeated until the child can perform a response without prompts. The ultimate aim of ABA is to teach the child how to learn from the normal environment, and how to act in that environment, so that it will consistently produce positive outcomes for the child and others.

This effective and tested approach has caught the attention of parents and autistic educational centres in Malaysia. Non-governmental organisations such as NASOM (National Autistic Society of Malaysia) and private individuals have set up centres that use this approach to teach autistic children. Some parents are also using this approach so that their children can acquire appropriate communicational skills in order to be assimilated into society.

1.2 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Appropriate education and job opportunities are available for children with autism in developed countries. Their government provides facilities to increase mobility in order to enhance the independence of these children. This assistance and support has enabled autistic children like Temple Grandin to achieve a doctorate in Agriculture. Similar assistance should be given to the Malaysian children with autism by the government and
the public so that they too can achieve great heights in the field of education and function as a part of the society.

Lately, the media and non-governmental organizations such as NASOM have been playing a vital role in increasing public awareness with regards to this disorder. Parents are finally aware of their children’s problems and deficits which come with this disorder. Together with this realisation they have also learnt that their autistic children can be taught communicational skills.

Due to this exposure, parents are able to seek help to assess the disorder at an early age, thus giving the child an opportunity to participate in early intervention programmes since every waking moment is precious for a child with autism. The Internet too has played an important role in allowing access to important information and research done in autism to one and all. This exposure has also increased the number of individuals specializing in teaching these special children.

In the local scene, an increasing number of individuals and non-governmental organizations such as NASOM, are setting up schools to cater to the needs of autistic children. Parent support groups such as PR4A (Parents Resource for Autistics) play a vital role in lending support and information to parents of autistic children. They also invite foreign specialists to talk on new methods, which are currently being used to help autistic children acquire communicative skills effectively in order to form social relationships. The teachers who are exposed to these latest techniques adopt and sometimes adapt them in the local schools.

Therefore, in enrolling the autistic children in schools, parents are giving them an opportunity to learn communicative skills that can help them lead an independent life to a certain extent. One approach which is currently being used to teach communicational skills in some of the special education schools in Malaysia is the Applied Behavioural Analysis Programme.
This study has been carried out to describe the communicative skills acquired by a group of autistic children who enrolled into the ABA programme with little or no communicative skills.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The first objective of this study is to show that the children with autism who have enrolled into the ABA programme with little or no communicative skills have acquired some skills after the implementation over a period of one year.

The second objective is to show that the children are able to generalize the skills that they have learnt and use them in their daily life.

The third objective is to show that the children with autism use the skills that they have learnt when they see a need for communication to occur.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted to:

1) show the effectiveness of the ABA programme in teaching communicative skills to children with autism.

2) create awareness of the communicative skills exhibited by children with autism before and after being exposed to ABA and the difficulties they face in acquiring these basic skills in order to:

   a) improve teaching strategies so that learning can be made easier and more interesting.

   b) help teachers set and work towards realistic goals in developing autistic childrens’ ability to communicate.
1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which type of skill is easily acquired by the autistic children? What are the factors which influence the acquisition of each type of skill?

2. Do the children use the skills they have acquired to communicate inside and outside the classroom situation? What are the contexts in which the children use the skill?

3. What are the problems faced by the students and the teachers while learning or teaching these skills?

4. How can teaching strategies be modified in order to enhance the acquisition of communicational skills?

1.6 DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Baron-Cohen & Bolton, 1994: describe autism as,

"A condition that affects children from either birth or infancy and leaves them unable to form normal social relationships, or to develop normal communication. As a result, the child may become isolated from human contact and become absorbed in a world of repetitive, obsessional activities and interest."

(Cohen & Bolton, 1994:1)

Communication is an essential process, which enables man to transmit and receive information, signals or messages by means of gestures, movements, facial expressions, talking or writing. Man must have knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication and world knowledge in order to satisfy his needs and live in a community.

Verbal communication consists of speech, the ability to articulate the specific speech sounds, and language. According to Gleason (1989) humans begin to acquire language, the most desired form of communication during their first months, long before they say their first words. Being portable, since it is part of a child’s musculature and the
availability of a large speaking community have brought about the rapid acquisition of language by children. Learning a language entails knowing its verbal units namely: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

**Non-verbal communication**, which includes facial expression, eye-contact, proximity (distance apart and angle of body), tone and pitch of voice, gestures and body movements, speech speed and pausing is equally powerful and we are acute monitors of them.

Although verbal units and non-verbal signals form the major subscribers of effective communication, there are other minor but important contributors too, such as the possession of world knowledge.

1.7 **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study was successfully completed but several difficulties affected the results obtained.

Firstly, the students who participated in the study were not classified according to the levels of ability. Therefore, the group was of a mixed ability group.

Secondly, the test was only conducted on ten students of one centre due to various constraints.

Thirdly, it was difficult to get participation of the parents to relate the students activities or behaviour at home. The researcher had to rely on information from the teachers.

Despite the limitations, the results obtained from this study would be able to help the teachers at the centre adapt their teaching strategies in order to facilitate communication of children with autism.