Introduction

Aphasia is a language disorder caused by damage to the areas of brain responsible for language processing and language production.\(^1\) It is an acquired communication problem, which has a broad impact on and beyond language impairment, thus affecting one's participation in daily life. Communication partner training (CPT) has been considered an evidence-based intervention aimed at facilitating normally communicating individuals, like family members or healthcare workers, in communication. Unfortunately, the evidence regarding CPT is very limited in most countries, particularly non-English speaking and low and middle-income countries (LMICs).\(^2\)

Primary physicians attending such patients are the first to notice deficits and difficulties in communication, which is a common occurrence as a result of neurological injuries. In neuroimaging reports, the areas of brain with damage or infarction can be seen. After finding the difficulty in communication, a speech language pathologist (SLP) was consulted.\(^3\) Aphasia can cause profound communication problems among stroke survivors, and is a life-changing disability. It has been observed that individuals with aphasia show higher risks of depression than those who have survived stroke without aphasia. They also show poor outcomes in rehabilitation and higher mortality.\(^4,5\) A study in Pakistan revealed that 54.3% stroke survivors experienced aphasia.\(^6\)

Aphasia is not only restricted to a person's speech and language ability, but it also manifests in other areas, especially those affecting the quality of life (QOL) of a person. People with aphasia disconnect themselves from social gatherings and personal relationships because all such relationships are dependent upon one's ability to communicate with others. Thus, aphasia alters one's identity and changes patients' sense and perception of themselves. Depression has been the most frequently reported psychological symptoms of aphasia.\(^7\) Therefore, the rehabilitation process for aphasia also needs psychological intervention that may address issues like emotions, personality and other affected personal attributes.\(^8\) There are also psychosocial consequences of aphasia, and certain types of aphasia therapy services have been referred to as psychosocial. The term ‘psychosocial’ refers to the combination of psychological and social factors. While psychological factors are related to cognition

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**Common practices of Speech and language pathologists about partner oriented training to treat aphasia**

Fazaila Ehsaan, Nazia Mumtaz

**Abstract**

**Objective:** To find the common practices among speech language pathologists regarding partner-oriented training for aphasic patients.

**Method:** The exploratory, qualitative study was conducted at Riphah International University, Lahore, Pakistan, from March 1 to May 31, 2021, and comprised speech language pathologists working with aphasic patients for at least 5 years in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. Data was collected using a structured interview guide that were conducted online. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and the data was subjected to thematic analysis.

**Result:** Of the 10 subjects, 6(60%) were females and 4(40%) were males. Overall, 6(60%) subjects had professional experience of >10 years. Thematic analysis showed that most of the speech language pathologists used traditional approaches for aphasia treatment, and counselling of patient's caregiver was done. However, there was no formal tool in Urdu language to provide basic communication strategies for the patient's caregivers or their communication partners. The participants recommended efforts to develop such a tool.

**Conclusion:** There was found a dire need of communication partner training (CPT) programme for aphasia patients and their partners with appropriate linguistic and cultural norms to facilitate them with the aim of improving their quality of life.

**Keywords:** Aphasia, Quality of life, Speech therapies, Acquired communication disorder, Partner communication.

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and emotional wellbeing, social factors are related to one's surroundings and society. Thus, psychosocial consequence of aphasia pertains to how aphasia is affecting the daily life of persons with aphasia and their significant family members.

Communication partner training is a kind of intervention that involves training of someone not having aphasia. It is aimed at improving a person's communication, language, participation in life and ultimately overall wellbeing of an individual. Basically, communication partner is someone who is available to the person with aphasia (PWA) with whom such a person can have interactions, but this role is not limited to family members and friends. Due to increasing interest in aphasia and related communication and cognitive deficits, SLPs been more actively involved in the rehabilitation of post-stroke communication disorders. The primary role of an SLP in the interdisciplinary team is to assess and provide treatment for speech language deficits, including memory and attention difficulties.

A primary role of SLPs when working with people with aphasia is to choose the right intervention technique for a particular patient. This is important because treatment of patients with aphasia is a kind of intervention that is designed specifically for the individuals to focus on their specific goals and needs. The main purpose of aphasia rehabilitation is to do the restoration of language abilities, strengthen them, teach appropriate strategies for compensation of language, and train their families, caregivers or communication partners to communicate with the people having aphasia. It is very important to educate patients and their significant others about aphasia, its treatment and recovery process because rehabilitating the PWA includes improving the skills of a person in all contexts of communication.

CPT has been considered an effective interventional technique that decreases the negative impact of post-stroke language and communication deficits. Its focus is on offering different strategies and resources to communication partners that they require for supporting functional communication. It also enhances the overall wellbeing of persons with aphasia. Conversational training programmes have been increasingly reported for communication partners of aphasic people because they aim at improving communication, enhancing its effectiveness and ensuring successful recovery. It has been observed that clinical aphasiologists are more concerned towards social model of disability in their regular clinical practice. Many of them use the social context in their intervention for aphasic people.

It is challenging for communication partners to communicate with persons having post-stroke language and communication disorders. Training the communication partner can improve their ability to provide support for communication and also enhance the participation level of aphasic persons. Sufficient evidence has been presented in literature in support of CPT. CPT enhances QOL of aphasic people and lessens the negative psychosocial consequences.

The current study was planned to find the common practices among SLPs regarding partner-oriented training in the treatment of aphasia.

Subjects and Methods

The exploratory, qualitative study was conducted at the Riphah College of Rehabilitation and Allied Health Sciences, Riphah International University, Lahore, Pakistan, from March 1 to May 31, 2021, and comprised professionally qualified SLPs of either gender aged 25-60 years working with aphasic patients for at least 5 years in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. Those working on administrative posts and faculty members teaching without clinical experience were excluded. The sample was raised using purposive sampling technique after obtaining approval from the institutional ethics review committee. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

Data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in the English language using an interview guide, which included easily understandable questions regarding the emotional health of aphasic persons, support they receive from the people in their surroundings, recent techniques of assessment and management of aphasic persons and types of therapeutic approaches available for aphasia treatment. Finalisation of the interview guide was done by field experts before applying it on the sample population.

Prior to the interviews, discussion for a calibration session was done for practice to use the interview guide. The discussion was regarding the transparency, principles of honesty, independence, scrupulousness and responsibility. The interviews were based on qualitative research methodologies and phenomenology, which is basically the analysis of a phenomenon through the individual's lived experiences. All interviews were conducted online using Zoom. The participants were more inclined towards online interviews due to the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic that was prevailing during the data-collection phase. Each interview lasted approximately 40-60 minutes, and was audio-recorded with due consent.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then subjected to thematic analyses. An inductive approach was
used for the analyses due to exploratory design of the study. Data verification and interpretation was done by an external member who was a field expert. This process involved listening to the audio recordings and matching it with the transcription to ensure that it gave a true reflection of the respondent’s perspective. For the purpose of improving credibility, interviews were coded by one researcher and then checked by another.

Data analysis was done by using the steps identified by Braun and Clarke. By discussing the content and formulation of themes with experts, a final decision about the themes and subthemes was made to lead to a rational arrangement of the data.

**Results**

Of the 10 subjects, 6 (60%) were females and 4 (40%) were males. Overall, 6 (60%) subjects had professional experience of > 10 years (Table 1).

There were 9 themes that were identified: Emotional state of PWA; factors associated with recovery; assessment techniques used in practice; current therapeutic approaches; knowledge of partner-based approaches for PWA; need to develop CPT programme; prerequisites of communication partner; content of CPT programme; and impact on QOL (Table 2).

**Discussion**

In the theme ‘emotional state of PWA’ SLPs reported that a PWA feels embarrassed, aggressive, socially deprived and isolated. It has been documented in literature that aphasia, when compared with other range of serious health conditions, exhibit a very substantial and negative effect on one’s abilities to communicate, and relationships with their closed ones and community, leading to negative impact on one’s QOL.

The current study highlighted the theme ‘factors associated with recovery’, and reported that a number of factors associated with the recovery of a PWA, like type and severity of aphasia, provision of adequate services and patient characteristics, like age, extent of damage, motivation level, and caregiver characteristics, like availability or presence of caregiver and their duration of time-spend with PWA. These findings were consistent with a study, which concluded that age of the participant, presence of caregiver and involving family members in group therapy of patients had a significant role.

As regards the theme ‘assessment techniques used in practice’, the current respondents reported that usually informal assessment techniques were more preferred and used for diagnosing aphasia rather than formal assessment techniques. A systematic review also reported that out of 56 tests included, none was found to meet the diagnostic demands of SLPs, and a valid diagnostic tool was essentially required.

In the present study, the theme ‘current therapeutic approaches for knowledge of partner-based approaches’ reported that usually informal approach were more preferred and used for diagnosing aphasia.
approaches’ revealed that SLPs’ management of PWA included some formal therapeutic techniques, like melodic intonation therapy (MIT), constraint induced aphasia therapy (CIAT), and Schuell’s approach of auditory comprehension, and informal therapeutic approaches, like a combination of different therapeutic techniques. Also, the use of restorative approach, work on recognition, reception, auditory processing, memory functional communication and use of augmentative alternative communication (AAC) devices was reported. Similarly, a study noted that direct therapy for PWA can improve language processes for most patients, except those with severe aphasia where response may be poor, and highlighted that direct therapy and counselling should be instituted in all PWAs, while transcranial brains stimulation can also improve aphasia therapy results. The directions in the current study included non-invasive brain stimulation, novel speech language therapy as well as pharmacological and alternative interventions.

Another theme currently identified was ‘knowledge of partner-based approaches’ including community-based rehabilitation (CBR) and group therapy. This is in conformity with available literature which highlighted that the CBR programmes can bring positive rehabilitative results for those with disabilities, regardless of the type of impairment and group therapy has beneficial effects for augmenting aphasia patients’ communication and language skills.

In the theme ‘need to develop CPT programme,’ the current SLPs emphasised the immense need to develop such a programme that may accelerate the PWA progress. A narrative review highlighted that there are different approaches for aphasia therapy, with some focussing on reducing the language deficit by implying structured therapy sessions, and concentrating on components of language, like phonology, syntax, semantics and lexicon. While some other focussed on communication ability and did not put much emphasis on underlying language impairments. Generally, the functional therapeutic approaches focus on improving the communication by eliminating barriers in communication and by training the caregiver to enhance communication.

As regards the theme ‘pre-requisites of communication partner,’ the current SLPs highlighted the characteristics of a communication partners to be motivated with certain level of literacy and counselling skills along with empathy and must be well aware about the impairment of the person they are to work with. Shrubsole et al. mentioned availability of communication partner, time spent with PWA, familiarity with patient, lack of physical CPT resources, lack of motivation, showing signs of burden, not having enough procedural knowledge and familiarity with any CPT programme.

The theme ‘content of CPT programme’ highlighted SLPs’ opinion that culturally and linguistically appropriate local language, use of pictographs, activities of life participation, knowledge base of SLPS, home plans, early case of aphasia, interventions including oro-motor exercises, affordable augmentative alternative methods of communication, signing, posture and real-life and natural situation management were important. This was in compliance with an earlier study in which CPT was implemented on health personnel, and it reported that communicative strategies which were supported were useful and accepted by most participants and resulted in useful changes in health personnel communication with PWAs.

As regards the theme ‘impact on QOL’ current study SLPs highlighted that treating a person with aphasia through partner-oriented training programme can improve QOL and strengthen the communication skills, as CPT is considered the rehabilitation of the whole family. These findings are similar to those of an earlier study. Qualitative studies are valuable for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena, but they do come with certain limitations. During the study, it was observed that the findings were heavily dependent on the specific context in which the research was being conducted. Factors such as the cultural background of the participants, the healthcare system in place, and the available resources could have influenced the findings. Also, a qualitative study design often involves a relatively small number of participants, which can limit the generalisability of the findings.

Conclusion
The need of CPT for aphasic patients and their significant others with appropriate linguistic and cultural norms was clearly established, as it would fulfil the specific needs of people living with aphasia, and improve QOL.

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