



# Impact of Covid-19 on Speech Therapy: Review Article

**Sundus Rahim**

*Speech & Language Therapist*

## ABSTRACT

### Aim

*This document aims to achieve an adequate understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted different aspects of speech language therapy. It provides an insight into the negative and positive changes that are caused by the pandemic and supports them with real life events.*

### Methodology

*This literature review takes into consideration research and analyses from 2019 to 2023 in order to monitor the effects of COVID-19 on speech language therapy. The qualitative research allows for more accurate and recent resources from Google Scholar database. Some of these are Frontiers, National Library of Medicine (NIH), Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, Murray State University and Wiley Online Library etc.*

### Conclusion

*COVID-19 has had a massive impact of speech language therapy, as many in-person sessions were cancelled or moved to a virtual format. This has proved to be a significant challenge for both patients and therapists and virtual means cannot offer the same level of support and engagement. Additionally, many individuals with speech and language disorders have experienced increased isolation and communication difficulties which may have exacerbated their conditions. However, some speech language pathologists have found new ways of addressing these issues in the midst of COVID-19 such as telepractice which will make therapy accessible to traditionally limited areas.*

**Keywords:** *Coronavirus, COVID-19, speech language therapy, impacts, speech therapy*

## I. INTRODUCTION

**COVID-19**, also known as the coronavirus disease, is a highly contagious respiratory illness that emerged in Wuhan, China in 2019. The virus has since spread rapidly to nearly every corner of the globe, leading to widespread illness and death. The pandemic has also had a significant impact on various industries and professions, including speech language therapy. Speech language therapy, also known as speech therapy, is a healthcare profession that focuses on the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of communication and swallowing disorders. Speech language therapists work with individuals of all ages, from infants to the elderly, to help them communicate more effectively and overcome speech and language challenges (Santos-Longhurst, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on speech language therapy, both in terms of the delivery of services and the types of disorders that therapists are treating. Since the breakout of coronavirus in late 2019, the world has seen drastic change in all fields of life, including healthcare departments. Because of social distancing, controlling diseases and carrying out medical diagnoses of several illnesses like HIVs, malaria and cancers became impossible. The detection and testing of these diseases plunged 26-96% across different

countries depending on how badly the virus hit (Geddes, 2022). One of the most significant effects of the pandemic has been the shift to telepractice, or the delivery of speech therapy services via videoconferencing. Due to social distancing and quarantine measures, many speech therapists have been forced to provide services remotely, which has presented a number of challenges (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2010).

During the pandemic, half of the world did not have access to healthcare and after the outbreak, this count has only worsened. According to News Medical, in 25 weeks COVID-19 has pushed back the medicine field 25 years back in time (Cuffari, 2021). After taking statistics into account, it is apparent that speech language therapy has not escaped the virus's negative effects either. This document focuses on discussing the long and short running impacts of coronavirus. It considers both positive and negative effects supported by real-life events and happenings which prove that the pandemic has left considerable and concerning repercussions. Coronavirus patients experience issues in respiratory and nervous systems. Some of its symptoms include dyspnea (shortness of breath), weakness, muscle fatigue, cognitive and neuropsychological difficulties, and dysphagia (impairment in swallowing) (Kiekens et al., 2020). Some of these symptoms are associated with speech language therapy and thus, people getting diagnosed with them directly affected speech language therapy worldwide.

In the UK, two surveys were conducted among the members of Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT). This was done by circulating close-ended questions to them inquiring about their experience in service provision during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> week of COVID-19 declaration in the country. The results were extracted after considering factors such as changes in services before and during the pandemic. During the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in the UK, there were fewer referrals to speech and language therapy (SLT) services than in the previous year. Changes to the way services were provided, such as the use of teletherapy and not being able to see certain patients, were common. Data analysis shows that fewer patients have sought SLT since the pandemic began, including a decrease in the number of neurorehabilitation patients. However, for those who did receive SLT, the results were the same. SLTs were able to assist a variety of needs for COVID-19 patients, and treatment for patients with dysphagia was successful. (Sounderajah et al., 2020)

For example, a study conducted by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) found that many speech therapists reported difficulty providing effective therapy services remotely, due to technical difficulties, lack of access to necessary equipment, and difficulty building rapport with clients. Additionally, many therapists reported that they had difficulty assessing clients remotely, as they could not observe their clients' movements and expressions as well as they could in person. However, telepractice has also had some benefits, such as increased accessibility for clients who live in remote areas or have mobility challenges (Tucker, 2012). A study published in the International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology found that telepractice may be an effective way to provide speech therapy services to clients who have difficulty traveling to in-person appointments (Burns et al., 2019).

Another way that the pandemic has affected speech language therapy is by increasing the prevalence of certain disorders, such as social communication disorder and language delay. A study published in the Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research found that children exposed to COVID-19 had a higher risk of developing social communication disorder, which is characterized by difficulty with social interactions and communication (Charney et al., 2020). In addition, a study published in the International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology found that children exposed to COVID-19 had a higher risk of developing language delay, which is characterized by difficulty with language development (Tohidast et al., 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the delivery of speech therapy services for individuals with aphasia and dysphagia. A study published in the Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research found that individuals with aphasia were less likely to receive speech therapy services during the pandemic due to social distancing and quarantine measures, which is particularly concerning as aphasia is a chronic disorder that requires ongoing therapy to maintain communication abilities. Similarly, individuals with dysphagia were also less likely to receive speech therapy services during the pandemic, which is particularly concerning as dysphagia can lead to serious health complications such as pneumonia (Kong, 2021)

One issue is the difficulty in conducting remote therapy sessions. Many clients, particularly those with communication disorders, may have difficulty participating in remote therapy due to technology barriers or lack of privacy. A study published in the International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology found that remote therapy sessions often have lower rates of client engagement and participation compared to in-person sessions. Another issue is the increased risk of burnout among speech language therapists (Brito-Marcelino et al., 2020). Another study published in International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found that therapists who were providing remote therapy during the pandemic reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout compared to those providing in-person therapy (Hao et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, the field of speech language therapy has adapted and developed new strategies to continue providing quality care during the pandemic. Many clinics have shifted to a hybrid model of therapy, incorporating both remote and in-person sessions. Additionally, new technologies such as telepractice platforms and telehealth apps have been developed to enhance the remote therapy experience for clients. Furthermore, there have been some studies that have shown that speech therapy can be done remotely, and it still can be effective (Kearney et al., 2022). A study published in International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology found that remote therapy sessions can be as effective as in-person sessions for some clients, particularly those with mild to moderate communication disorders (Wales et al., 2017).

## II. DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had both short-term and long-term impacts on the field of speech language therapy. In the short-term, the sudden shift to remote therapy and the closure of many clinics has presented a number of challenges for both speech language therapists and their clients. These challenges include difficulty in conducting remote therapy sessions, increased risk of burnout among therapists and a lack of privacy and technology barriers for clients.

However, the field has adapted and developed new strategies to continue providing quality care during the pandemic. Many clinics have shifted to a hybrid model of therapy, incorporating both remote and in-person sessions. Additionally, new technologies such as telepractice platforms and telehealth apps have been developed to enhance the remote therapy experience for clients. In a study conducted among the speech language therapists in Saudi Arabia, it was revealed that 94% of the participants felt that there has been a significant impact of COVID-19 in their roles and experiences including work timing, counseling activities and the behavior of clients. The web-based survey also concluded that the professionals have adopted telehealth practices as an effective method (Al Awaji et al., 2022).

In the long-term, the pandemic may have a lasting impact on how speech language therapy is delivered. It may become more common for clinics to use telepractice and other forms of remote therapy in the future, even after the pandemic is over. This could lead to increased accessibility to speech language therapy services for individuals living in remote or underserved areas.

Likewise, there is also concern about the long-term effects of reduced access to in-person therapy for individuals with communication disorders during the pandemic. A study published in the International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology found that individuals who were not able to receive in-person therapy during the pandemic experienced a decline in communication abilities. This highlights the importance of continued research and evaluation of remote therapy methods to ensure that they are effective in maintaining or improving communication abilities in the long-term (Nader & Erickson, 2023).

Moreover, the long-term impact of the pandemic on Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) is also a concern. As the pandemic has been prolonged and many SLPs have been providing remote therapy for a long time, it is possible that this could result in more cases of burnout, leading to more SLPs leaving the field. This could lead to a shortage of SLPs, which could affect the accessibility of speech language therapy services for patients.

In addition to the impacts already discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the delivery of speech therapy services for specific populations. For example, individuals with autism have been particularly

affected by the disruptions in therapy services and routine caused by the pandemic. This is because individuals with autism often rely on consistent routine and structure in order to feel comfortable and make progress in therapy. A study published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders found that individuals with autism who received remote therapy during the pandemic experienced a decline in communication and social skills (Baweja et al., 2021)

Another population that has been affected by the pandemic is individuals with hearing loss. A study published in the International Journal of Audiology found that individuals with hearing loss who received remote therapy during the pandemic experienced a decline in communication abilities and a decrease in satisfaction with therapy. This highlights the importance of continuing to provide in-person therapy for individuals with hearing loss, as well as developing effective remote therapy methods for this population (Bhamjee et al., 2022).

The pandemic has also affected the education and training of future speech language therapists. Many universities and colleges have shifted to online learning, which has made it more difficult for students to gain hands-on experience and practice in real-world settings. This could have a long-term impact on the quality of therapy provided by future speech language therapists.

Apart from the above-mentioned points, the pandemic has also affected the financial aspect of the speech-language therapy field. Due to the closures of many clinics, many SLPs have lost their jobs. Those who have managed to keep their jobs have experienced a decrease in income as a result of the reduced number of clients. Moreover, many insurance companies are covering less for telepractice, which has resulted in a decrease in reimbursement for SLPs (Kearney et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about some positive changes in the field of speech language therapy. One such change is the expansion of telepractice. The pandemic has necessitated a shift towards online therapy delivery, and this has allowed for therapy services to become more accessible for individuals in remote or underserved areas who may have limited access to in-person therapy.

Another positive impact of the pandemic has been an increased focus on virtual and remote learning. The shift towards virtual and remote education has highlighted the importance of communication and language development in these settings, and has encouraged greater collaboration between speech language therapists, educators, and parents to support children's language development in these environments.

The pandemic has also led to a rise in innovative therapy approaches. With in-person therapy being limited, speech language therapists have had to find new and creative ways to deliver therapy, and this has resulted in the development of new and effective therapy methods. Additionally, the shift towards telepractice has improved accessibility for clients with mobility or transportation difficulties. Clients can now receive therapy from the comfort of their own home, without the need to travel to an in-person therapy session (Crowe et al., 2018)

On the other hand, the main challenges for speech language therapy in COVID-19 has been decreased access to in-person therapy. With the need for physical distancing measures, many therapy practices have been forced to close or limit the number of clients they can see, making it difficult for some individuals, particularly those living in rural or remote areas or with mobility issues, to access the therapy they need. Telepractice, while expanding access to therapy services, has also introduced new challenges. Technical difficulties with video conferencing software, difficulties maintaining privacy and confidentiality in virtual sessions, and the need for reliable internet access and technology have all added complexity to therapy delivery.

Likewise, the shift towards virtual therapy has created new barriers for some clients, particularly the elderly or those with limited access to technology, who may struggle to participate in virtual sessions and miss out on the benefits of therapy. The financial stability of speech language therapy practices has also been negatively impacted, with many practices facing losses due to the decreased availability of in-person therapy. This has led to a reduction in the number of therapy providers and added challenges for clients seeking therapy services (Binns et al., 2022)

Now that the world is out of the shackles of COVID-19, speech language therapy is also moving towards a new era of progressed changes and practices which were not applicable previously. Some of these are as follows.

1. **Telepractice:** Telepractice has become a popular method for speech language therapists to continue providing services to their clients during the pandemic. This allows for therapy sessions to be conducted online, minimizing in-person contact and reducing the risk of transmission. This has been particularly beneficial for clients in remote or underserved areas who may have limited access to in-person therapy. However, telepractice has also introduced new challenges, such as technological difficulties and privacy concerns. For instance, the quality of the internet connection, the availability of necessary technology, and the need for client privacy to be protected during online sessions are important considerations (Kollia & Tsiamsiouris, 2021)

2. **Virtual and remote learning:** The shift towards virtual and remote learning has emphasized the importance of communication and language development in educational settings. This has increased the demand for speech language therapists to provide virtual consultation and support to educators and parents in order to ensure that children's language development is not impacted by the pandemic. This has led to speech language therapists having to adapt to new methods of working, such as virtual meetings and remote consultation, to continue supporting clients effectively.

3. **In-person therapy:** In-person therapy has had to adapt to ensure the safety of clients and therapists during the pandemic. This has involved increased use of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, and increased focus on sanitizing materials and surfaces. However, some previously common practices, such as sharing materials and close physical proximity during therapy activities, may no longer be possible. This has led to speech language therapists having to find new and innovative ways to provide effective therapy while maintaining safety precautions.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in the field of speech language therapy. It has necessitated a shift towards telepractice and virtual consultation, as well as new approaches to in-person therapy. Despite these challenges, speech language therapists have been innovative and adaptive in their response to the changing circumstances, ensuring that clients continue to receive effective therapy.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on speech language therapy, affecting both the delivery of services and the types of disorders that therapists are treating. Telepractice has presented challenges for therapists, but it has also increased accessibility for clients who live in remote areas or have mobility challenges. The pandemic has also increased the prevalence of certain disorders, such as social communication disorder. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a number of challenges for the field of speech language therapy, but it has also led to the development of new strategies and technologies to continue providing quality care.

Despite the challenges, speech-language pathologists have adapted to provide care to their clients through new methods of treatment, such as telepractice. It is important for the field to continue to research and evaluate the effectiveness of these new approaches in order to provide the best care for clients during this unprecedented time. The COVID-19 pandemic has had both short-term and long-term impacts on the field of speech language therapy. While the field has adapted and developed new strategies to continue providing quality care during the pandemic, it is important to continue researching and evaluating the effectiveness of these new approaches to ensure that they provide the best care for clients in the long-term.

### IV. REFERENCES

1. Al Awaji, N. N., AlMudaiheem, A. A., & Mortada, E. M. (2022). Changes in speech, language and swallowing services during the Covid-19 pandemic: The perspective of speech-language pathologists in Saudi Arabia. *PLOS ONE*, 17(1), e0262498. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262498>

2. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2010). Telepractice: Overview. *Asha.org*. <https://doi.org/https://www.asha.org/PRPSpecificTopic.aspx?folderid=8589934956>
3. Baweja, R., Brown, S. L., Edwards, E. M., & Murray, M. J. (2021). COVID-19 Pandemic and Impact on Patients with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-04950-9>
4. Bhamjee, A., le Roux, T., Swanepoel, D. W., Graham, M. A., Schlemmer, K., & Mahomed-Asmail, F. (2022). Perceptions of Telehealth Services for Hearing Loss in South Africa's Public Healthcare System. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(13), 7780. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19137780>
5. Binns, A. V., Cunningham, B. J., Andres, A., & Oram Cardy, J. (2022). Current practices, supports, and challenges in speech-language pathology service provision for autistic preschoolers. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 7, 239694152211207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415221120768>
6. Brito-Marcelino, A., Oliva-Costa, E. F., Sarmiento, S. C. P., & Carvalho, A. A. (2020). Burnout syndrome in speech-language pathologists and audiologists: a review. *Revista Brasileira de Medicina Do Trabalho*, 00(00). <https://doi.org/10.47626/1679-4435-2020-480>
7. Burns, C. L., Ward, E. C., Gray, A., Baker, L., Cowie, B., Winter, N., Rusch, R., Saxon, R., Barnes, S., & Turvey, J. (2019). Implementation of speech pathology telepractice services for clinical swallowing assessment: An evaluation of service outcomes, costs and consumer satisfaction. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare*, 25(9), 545–551. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357633x19873248>
8. Charney, S. A., Camarata, S. M., & Chern, A. (2020). Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Communication and Language Skills in Children. *Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery*, 165(1), 019459982097824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0194599820978247>
9. Crowe, K., Masso, S., & Hopf, S. (2018). Innovations actively shaping speech-language pathology evidence-based practice. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20(3), 297–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549507.2018.1462851>
10. Cuffari, B. (2021, April 6). *How has the COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted Global Health?* News-Medical.net. <https://www.news-medical.net/health/How-has-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Impacted-Global-Health.aspx>
11. Geddes, L. (2022). *How the COVID-19 pandemic has affected healthcare around the world*. *Www.gavi.org*. <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/how-covid-19-pandemic-has-affected-healthcare-around-world>
12. Hao, Y., Zhang, S., Conner, A., & Lee, N. Y. (2021). The Evolution of Telepractice Use during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives of Pediatric Speech-Language Pathologists. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(22), 12197. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182212197>
13. Kearney, A., Searl, J., Erickson-DiRenzo, E., Damrose, E. J., & Doyle, P. C. (2022). The Impact of COVID-19 on Speech-Language Pathologists Engaged in Clinical Practices With Elevated Coronavirus Transmission Risk: A 2021 Follow-Up Study. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 7(6), 1738–1749. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2022\\_persp-22-00125](https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_persp-22-00125)
14. Kearney, A., Searl, J., Erickson-DiRenzo, E., & Doyle, P. C. (2021). The Impact of COVID-19 on Speech-Language Pathologists Engaged in Clinical Practices With Elevated Coronavirus Transmission Risk. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 30(4), 1673–1685. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2021\\_ajslp-20-00325](https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_ajslp-20-00325)
15. Kiekens, C., Boldrini, P., Andreoli, A., Avesani, R., Gamna, F., Grandi, M., Lombardi, F., Lusuardi, M., Molteni, F., Perboni, A., & Negrini, S. (2020). Rehabilitation and respiratory management in the acute and early post-acute phase. “Instant paper from the field” on rehabilitation answers to the COVID-19 emergency. *European Journal of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine*, 56(3). <https://doi.org/10.23736/s1973-9087.20.06305-4>
16. Kollia, B., & Tsiamsiouris, J. (2021). Influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on telepractice in speech-language pathology. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 49(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2021.1908210>

17. Kong, A. P.-H. (2021). The Impact of COVID-19 on Speakers With Aphasia: What Is Currently Known and Missing? *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 64(1), 176–180. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2020\\_jslhr-20-00371](https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_jslhr-20-00371)
18. Nader, D. T., & Erickson, K. A. (2023). Teletherapy, AAC & COVID-19: the experiences of speech language pathologists providing teletherapy during a global pandemic. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07434618.2022.2159871>
19. Santos-Longhurst, A. (2019, May 9). *Speech Therapy: What It Is, How It Works & Why You May Need Therapy*. Healthline. <https://www.healthline.com/health/speech-therapy>
20. Sounderajah, V., Clarke, J., & Yalamanchili, S. (2020, September 16). *Bridging the Digital Divide: A National Survey Assessing Public Readiness for Digital Health Strategies Against COVID-19 within the United Kingdom*. Www.researchsquare.com. <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-78605/v1>
21. Tohidast, S. A., Mansuri, B., Bagheri, R., & Azimi, H. (2020). Provision of speech-language pathology services for the treatment of speech and language disorders in children during the COVID-19 pandemic: Problems, concerns, and solutions. *International Journal of Pediatric Otorhinolaryngology*, 138, 110262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijporl.2020.110262>
22. Tucker, J. K. (2012). Perspectives of Speech-Language Pathologists on the Use of Telepractice in Schools: The Qualitative View. *International Journal of Telerehabilitation*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.5195/ijt.2012.6102>
23. Wales, D., Skinner, L., & Hayman, M. (2017). The Efficacy of Telehealth-Delivered Speech and Language Intervention for Primary School-Age Children: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Telerehabilitation*, 9(1), 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.5195/ijt.2017.6219>