

# **An effective strategy for internalizing language -- inner speech**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents an overview of the characteristics of inner speech which is fundamental to an effective outer speech. The relationship between inner speech and self-awareness is explored. There is a possibility that inner speech might just represent the cognitive process of processing information about itself. Inner speech parallels the state of self-awareness, is more frequently used among highly self-conscious persons, and represents an effective, if not indispensable, tool involved in the formation of the self-concept. The benefits of inner speech such as increasing memory retention and deep processing are discussed. Then it challenges the popular assumption that the silent period produced by the learner is a negative phenomenon. The assumption that outer voice indicates language learning is so deeply rooted in some of the language teachers that silent period may be a sign of inactivity or not doing anything at all. Thus a lot of emphasis is laid on reading aloud after the teacher and questions-and – answers. The teachers' intervention actually inhabits inner voice and interferes with learners' active mental representations and language learning. The paper calls for early training of inner speech and suggests concentrating on learners' vocabulary at beginning level and postponing reading until substantial vocabulary has been acquired so as to ensure inner voice development. Since inner speech facilitates learning especially oral English, different kinds of learning activities have been designed to help produce inner speech. The paper also stresses the importance of using authentic materials and making use of L1 inner speech so as to provide favourable learning conditions.

**Key words:** inner voice language learning

## 1.0 Introduction

Creating non-threatening language learning environment and providing adequate time for learners to get psychologically ready are essential in language learning. This article is about how to make use of the effective learning strategy—inner speech to create psychologically favourable conditions for learners to engage in meaningful language study and achieve cognitive development. This paper presents an overview of the characteristics and benefits of inner speech which is fundamental to an effective outer speech. Then it points out the reasons for the deficiency of inner speech in L2 learners and investigates possible ways to train L2 learners to build up their inner speech from early stages of language learning.

## 2.0 Research on inner speech

### 2.1 The characteristics of inner speech.

As we know everyone use inner speech to some extent. The functions of L1 inner speech can be found in the research done by Berk and Diaz (1992), Sokolov(1972), Tomlinson (2000), and Vygotsky(1986).

Developmental psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky were interested in the origins and processes of cognitive development. Piaget called the self -talking egocentric speech, for their speech was not directed towards other individuals. In Piaget's view this is a sign of cognitive immaturity, and as the children grow older they socialize increasingly more with others, and their speech becomes communicative and becomes more critical and logical. Piaget sees thought driving on language

The decisive meaning in the development of thought is in inner or silent speech (Vygotsky1982, 99). According to Vygotsky(1982,243-244), inner speech has its characteristic features which is simplified and it is hardly intelligible without context. It consists of elliptical utterances (1982, 230-244).He argued that self-directed speech did not show any cognitive immaturity, but did show some form of development and that a child begins to differentiate between speech that is directed towards the others and speech that is self-directed. Vygotsky sees thought and language as having different roots, but they eventually combine. Language guides and drives thought on. The inner speech assumes important cognitive functions, such as planning, monitoring, and guiding oneself while engaging in various activities.

Vygotsky(1982) also sees that as a child grows older, this self-directed speech changes into silent inner speech, because the child "thinks" the words instead of pronouncing them. Private speech is connected with children's thinking because it helps them overcome difficulties. We all may have noticed that many children talk to themselves. Laura Berk reports that, "private speech can account for 20-60 percent of the remarks a child younger than 10 years makes" (Berk 1994, 78).

Berk asserts that "private speech is an essential part of cognitive development for all children" (1994, 78). He also found that "consequently, children omit words and phrases that refer to things they already know about a given situation. They state only those aspects that still seem puzzling" (Berk 1994, 78). Both children and adults use private speech. You may have noticed yourself talking out loud when you are under stress, feel extremely disappointed or excited, have a lot to do, or are trying to figure out how to solve a problem . Whenever we meet challenging tasks private speech play the role of planning and monitoring. It can help us adjust our behaviour by expressing our feelings to ourselves.

Private speech helps children perform better in school and it is beneficial to their cognitive development. Berk claims that "research has confirmed that children, like adults, use private speech when they find tasks difficult or when they made errors, and that when they use task-relevant private speech, their performance on a variety of tasks improves" (Berk 1994,281). As Berk (1992:21) points out, private speech "is the silent dialogs that we carry on with ourselves." He claims that "the need to engage in private speech never disappears. Whenever we encounter unfamiliar or demanding activities in our lives, private speech resurfaces. It is a tool that helps us overcome obstacles and acquire new skills"(Berk 1994). He asserts that private utterances provide a channel for "self expression and release" and "illustrate the role of language

for the self when an individual is faced with a challenging task beyond his/her current level of mastery.

Common applications of private speech can be found in memorizing vocabulary by saying the words silently, appreciating plays or poetry by "dramatising" it in your inner world, editing papers by thinking the text aloud, preparing public speech by rehearsing it in your mind and talking through math problems to yourself to arrive at solutions.

## 2.2 Self-awareness and inner speech

There is a possibility that inner speech might just represent the cognitive process of processing information about itself. Inner speech parallels the state of self-awareness, is more frequently used among highly self-conscious persons, and represents an effective, if not indispensable, tool involved in the formation of the self-concept. The possibility is also raised that the extent to which one uses inner speech could partially explain individual differences in self-consciousness and self-knowledge.

In social experimental psychology self-awareness has been defined as the ability to become the object of one's own attention; it refers to a sophisticated form of self-attention which includes self-evaluation, where the individual actively identifies, processes and stores information about the self.

Morin (1993) proposed that self-awareness is mediated by inner speech: the individual in a state of self-awareness would talk to himself/herself about his/her personal characteristics and behaviors. Siegrist (1996) also found that highly self-aware individuals significantly use inner speech more frequently in comparison to less self-aware individuals. This suggests that the more one focuses on the self the more one talks to himself or herself.

During the language learning process, constant self-monitoring is helpful. Some learners are conscious of the process of manipulating the language forms in order to express better in public voice. Such self-awareness may facilitate language learning and cognitive process. The learners have to draw on their linguistic and world knowledge to understand and negotiate for meaning. From a psychological point of view, such self monitoring serves as a prelude to the final learning outcome. When learners pay attention to or evaluate their linguistic forms to be produced, a lot of mental activities will take place. Self – evaluation is a active mental process of information during which learners may talk to themselves, especially before speaking in public.

## 3.0 The benefits of inner speech

### 3.1 Practical functions

Private speech of the learner facilitates two fundamental cognitive operations: focusing of attention and the creation of psychological distance. It enables the participants to concentrate on the tasks at crucial moments and to distance themselves from the problems they encounter, thereby gaining control in the performance of tasks. (Frederick J , Dicamill, M.A 2004).

We tend to use only phrases and incomplete sentences in private speech. What is said reflects our thoughts. We omit what we already know or understand, but the private voice can be puzzling, new, or challenging and it is helpful for long term memory.

Since inner speech provides learners with the time and space to reflect upon what they hear and read, it can be helpful to their comprehension and public voice. The more we use inner speech the more connections we make and the more we retain what we learn. We read, create images, listen, use music or motion, and talk with others (collaborative learning) and with ourselves. Some of us like to talk things through with someone or in a group, either to help us understand or to remember better. And some of us prefer to talk with themselves in this process. This can be a learning style, and a very effective one.

### 3.2 Effective communication

It is a useful tool in learning. By using private speech we have one more means to make interactions. We do not only communicate with others but with ourselves as well. In other words, when learners use private speech in verbal communication, they are not talking to others but trying to control their own behaviour in the inner speech. Most importantly, the environment for talking to oneself is free of all sorts of anxieties and disturbances. Thus, this learning style can be more effective if classroom learning conditions are favourable. The individualized learning style is multidimensional, for the inner world can be rich in senses and experiences as well as imaginations and associations. It can reinforce our learning and memorization.

Tomlinson(2000,137) also claims that ‘inner voice ensures active mental representation on the basis of our existing knowledge of the world and our views about it’. Relating the linguistic input to our personal knowledge is a cognitive process in which active mental representation is produced .The inner speech can be a comment or evaluation such as ‘it is wonderful ’ or a question(e.g. what should I do ?) or a self-assurance(e.g. take your time). The self-negotiation is a natural psychological response to the stimuli in the outside world. In L1 such inner self –negotiation with the outside world is subconscious, because of adequate linguistic competence. L2 learners do not have the necessary linguistic knowledge to express their feelings until they reach advanced level or near native like linguistic competence. Thus authentic materials are essential for L2 learners especially materials which contain linguistic knowledge to express feelings, to make comments or evaluations and to make judgements or self-assurance.

### 3.3 Increasing memory retention

By reading aloud we may not have better memory retention. Instead, with inner voice we have better memory retention of the mental representations of those which we perceived as salient (Sadoski and Paivio 1994 cited in Tomlinson 2003).The physical context in which linguistic input is produced can be vivid scene or images left in our minds for later recalling. We normally recall the mental representations of utterances rather than the actually utterances themselves (Tomlinson 2003). He also asserts that if we are going to communicate the recall, we convert these images into speech prior to expressing them with the outer voice.

### 3.4 Deep processing and self-monitoring

With inner speech, we are able to use multiple senses and experiences to process and reinforce our learning, and the combination of these strategies is quite individual. Like editing a composition, learners can observe their linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour by self monitoring in their inner world. They tend to produce inner speech consciously to see if the comment or evaluation they make are appropriate linguistically and pragmatically. For example, before making a presentation or public speech, learners can use inner speech to prepare for it by brainstorming ideas which are relevant to the topic and try out words and sentence structures to express the ideas. Since the ideas are developed for real communication, the learners may undergo deep mental processing. Therefore, L2 learners' inner speech which translates into outer voice is meaning and form focused.

Inner speech not only helps speaking but also reading as well. It gives learners the chance to ask questions and helps learners to form ideas as well as make predictions about the text. It enables learners to compare and contrast events, ideas and characters, visualize information that is described in the text and make connections to prior knowledge. It is different from outer voice, for there is room for private mental activities while reading aloud may encourage learners to focus more on the sounds.

We may ask learners to read a line or two from a selection, and then stop to think aloud. Learners may make comments of what they read (e.g. He is really stupid!) or make comparisons or predict what will happen next (e.g. I wonder if he will get what he wants.). We can see that both linguistic input and non-linguistic input can be significant for generating thoughts and inner voice. Learners who are used to looking at words and make verbal sounds should need time to practice before inner speech happen all at once.

Sokolov(1972:65) stressed the importance of inner speech which contributes to outer speech. Inner speech should be regarded as preparation for outer speech. It enables learners to process their thoughts and linguistic items such as selecting appropriate words and expressions and generating ideas, thereby achieving a perspective that in turn helped them to gain control in the performance of the task. Inner speech enables us to practice internally and the mental representations and inner speech will help perfect the outer speech. In other words, when an individual uses private speech in verbal communication, s/he is not talking to another individual but trying to control her/his own self in that the speech helps mentally process task demands.

## 4.0 The development of L2 inner speech

### 4.1 The general assumption

As we know, young children talk to themselves—sometimes as much or even more than they talk to other people. Many parents and teachers misinterpret this as a sign of disobedience, inattentiveness or even mental instability. In fact, private speech is an essential part of cognitive development for all children. Recognition of this fact should strongly influence how both normal children and children who have trouble learning are taught.

But the assumption that outer voice indicates language learning is so deeply rooted in some of the language teachers that silent period may be a sign of inactivity or not doing anything at all. As a result, during class observation or evaluation, teachers may make every effort to avoid silent period and to ensure immediate response from the learners. Thus a lot of emphasis is laid on reading aloud after the teacher and questions-and – answers. Through extensive mimicry, memorization and "over-learning" of language patterns and forms, learners and teachers were often able to see immediate results. The teachers' intervention actually inhabit inner voice, that is, interfering with learners' active thinking and preparatory stage. Just as Brian Tomlinson (2001) points out that 'it might have some value in developing a formulaic competence, but their overuse can prevent the development of inner and private voices in the L2 as they do not allow time for thought, do not offer any problems to think about, and they focus the learner's attention on correct forms of the public voice'.

#### 4.2 The need for inner speech

The individual differences in self-consciousness may explain the extent to which one uses inner speech. The silent learners who are sensitive to the outside world tend to resort more to the inner world mental activities. They are so sensitive to their self-image that they are inclined to use inner speech. Such highly self-conscious people are often assumed to be reticent for they keep silent when an immediate response is demanded. Actually the silent learners are analytical and full of imaginations. A lot of learning is going on when inner speech is made.

Some L2 learners, particularly if they are children or beginners, undergo a silent period. That is, they make no attempt to say anything to begin with. The learners may be learning a lot by silent period which is a period of preparation for future production because learning will take place only when learners are ready. The learners may feel tense and anxious when teachers openly find fault with their answers. This may lead to feeling of lowered self-image and increased self-consciousness, all of which, presumably, interfere with language learning.

In a language classroom, different learners have different learning styles. Highly conscious or sensitive learners often need a silent period before they produce anything orally, for they tend to care more about how well they present their out speech. Forcing them to produce public speech will raise the anxiety level and put pressure on the self-consciousness to the extent that they are likely to do more monitoring of their public speech.

Different people have different inner speeches and it is a personal behaviour which can not be regarded as absent-mindedness. Providing space for developing personal thoughts and ideas is far more beneficial to learning a language than merely reading aloud after the teacher or imitating the voices on a tape or video which is a low-level linguistic decoding and which does not encourage creative thinking. The focus on external speech at the expense of inner speech can not produce desired external speech, for the learners have no chance to analyze linguistic input and generate ideas. Cognitive psychologists argue that mimicry and rote learning advocated by the audio-lingual methodology, could not account for the fact that language learning involved affective and interpersonal factors.

The experiments done by Tomlinson(1996) show that native speakers are reported to have talked to themselves and seen mental images but L2 learners do not show such processes. The reason for this is that effective learning conditions have not been established. The inhibition of inner speech from teaching is the most obvious problem and the assumption that outer voice is the only sign of language learning should be eliminated. Cognitive development should be based on the good learning conditions which allow for individualised thinking and inner negotiations on the part of the learners. Tomlinson (2001) also asserts that ‘without effective inner voice, we cannot produce meaningful public speech’.

In L2 inner speech should be given primacy from the beginning just as L2 inner speech is allowed to develop naturally. The imposition of external speech from the beginning is actually detrimental to the personal cognitive development and inhabits the inner voice, thus slowing down thought and retarding creativity’ (Tomlinson 2001). He also argued that learners should be given time to think and they must not be forced to perform in a public voice without having an inner voice available to help them prepare’.

## 5.0 Suggestions for inner speech development

### 5.1 Early training of inner speech

Appel and lentolf(1994) reported how advanced L2 learners used inner voice and visual images in language learning. Tomlinson (2001) claimed that learners of advanced levels do not typically use inner voice but they are quite capable of doing so.

Actually low- level and intermediate learners can also be trained to use visual images and inner voice in rehearsing short term memory features, thus gaining more confidence in speaking publicly. The earlier the learners acquire the ability to visualize and use inner voice, the better cognitive development they will have.

Since L1 children’s inner speech which develops naturally at the same time as the external voice(Tomlinson 2002) is of great help to their future language learning(Uhskavoc 1994), L2 learners are supposed to learn to use inner speech as early as possible. Instead of focusing on low-level linguistic decoding, teachers should encourage learners to use inner speech to recall texts and to understand texts by providing silent period so that learners will lose anxiety about public speech and gradually learn to produce meaningful public speech. Savill-Troike(1998) has done some research on how L2 learners use inner speech to prepare for public speech. While listening to a recording or watching TV, learners can use inner voice to achieve repetition of others’ utterances, which is beneficial to learning linguistic features and formation of new ideas such as comments and evaluations and new language forms. Tomlinson (2001) even suggests that L2 Learners respond mentally, physically or even in the L1. The purpose is to create a fertile ground for freedom of thought, mental representations and adequate time for rehearsal.

### 5.2 Authentic materials for inner speech development

‘Inner speech is similar in many ways to colloquial speech (Tomlinson 2003). The characteristics is that it is elliptical and incomplete but coherent and economical. In our textbooks, it is hard to find such colloquial speech and learners are exposed to

well-formed sentences. The teachers should adapt their teaching materials accordingly so that learners can acquire variety of language which can facilitate the development of inner speech. Moreover, teachers should talk to the learners naturally rather than with pre-planned sentences to provide more colloquial language input. Teachers can supplement some provocative texts for affective engagement and mental responses. Narrative texts are suitable for such purpose for they make use of inner speech by narrators and other protagonists. Through literature such as stories and descriptions which could be the starters for visualization and inner speech, learners can experience instances of inner voice. And teachers can illustrate the instances of private speech for self-comments or evaluation or questions in the texts and learners can also notice the specific features of inner voice used by listening to or reading short stories which contain characters talking to themselves. If the text is not engaging enough, learners may find nothing to respond to mentally.

### 5.3 Making use of L1 inner speech

L1 has always been regarded as a distraction by teachers who tend to intervene when learners use L1 in their class. In fact, for the low-level learners and intermediate learners the use of L1 is unavoidable in performing tasks, because they do not have adequate language to express themselves well. Tomlinson(2001) claims that the use of L1 should be positively encouraged so that learners can respond mentally and intelligently to what they hear and read. Their involvement in the meaning negotiation and communication will not be broken down with the use of L1 which at times actually facilitates their mental representations. If they are allowed to use L1 in class, their inner speech will be encouraged. Thus a good foundation will be laid for L2 inner speech when learners have achieved adequate proficiency level.

### 5.4) Vocabulary building for inner speech development

Tomlinson (2001) suggests concentrating on learners' vocabulary at beginning level and postponing reading until substantial vocabulary has been acquired. Once learners have acquired enough vocabulary, they will be able to relate the language to what is going on in the outside world and form mental representations. The tendency that learners of different levels use the same textbook may create problems for the less able learners to develop their inner voice. They may have to struggle with the low-level linguistic decoding of the expressions, let alone visual images and inner voice.

### 5.5 Practical activities for inner speech activities

Since inner speech facilitates learning especially oral English, different kinds of learning activities have been designed to help produce inner speech. Asher (1994) initiated Total Physical Response (TPR) which is beneficial to learners' mental activities. TPR allows learners to acquire vocabulary in a manner similar to how a child learns his or her first language. All language input is immediately comprehensible, often hands-on, and allows learners to pass through a silent period whereby they build a comprehension base before ever being asked to speak. This gives learners enough time to absorb or comprehend the language input in a relaxed atmosphere and prepare for the future production time. The learners' anxiety level is low. Once language is internalized, production becomes easier, thus setting TPR apart from traditional "listen-and-repeat" methods.

In TPR Storytelling, learners can hear, see, act out, retell, revise and rewrite. Learners add creativity and originality to their own versions of stories. Once having made a good preparation, they are then highly motivated to communicate these stories to other learners. The low level of stress in the mental preparation stage the learners' fluency and motivation increase. Making their own version of the stories eliminates the need for memorization of the actual stories. Once the story is internalized, learners then retell it to a partner. Learners may tell the story from memory or may use illustrations or guide words written up on the board as cues. As variation, learners can be given opportunities to write, illustrate, act out and share original stories before they actually tell stories to others. Tomlinson(1990)found similar beneficial uses of private speech among Indonesian learners who use a TPR programme in which a five week silent period is provided.

When learners have familiarized themselves with inner speech in an experienced approach, they can be given inner speech tasks. Research has shown that inner speech is a sign of mental orientation rather than a failure to use the L2 correctly and that L2 learners would develop inner speech with good communicative tasks, ( Frawley and Lantolf1985,McCafferty1994). The following activities may be helpful.

- 1) The learners repeat the text in their mind when reading or listening to the target language.
- 2) They can summarize the texts or stories mentally after reading or listening to it.
- 3) When reading a story, the learner can stop and think aloud what they want to say.
- 4) They can write diaries of their own experience, their thoughts and ideas.
- 5) They can write their imaginations of things around them
- 6) They can do role plays or give presentations for which they have to do the rehearsal.

## 6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, in order to achieve better public voice, the old assumption about inner speech need to be changed. Also to enhance learners' cognitive development, inner speech should be encouraged whenever and wherever possible so as to provide learners with more opportunities to learn the language in a meaningful way.

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