

## Beyond Egocentrism: The Self-Regulatory and Mediating Role of Iranian EFL Learners' Private Speech

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### Abstract

According to many scholars, inner speech plays a role of paramount significance considering human cognitive development. There have been traditionally two distinctive views considering the role of inner speech known as egocentric speech popularized by Jean Piaget and his disciple and private speech put forward by Lev Vygotsky and his followers. The present study rests on the Vygotskian perspective on the role of inner speech as private speech which is socially oriented. Additionally, considering the role of private speech in L2 acquisition, Steiner (1992) provided an excellent overview of some settings in which she identifies three main contexts: thinking aloud speech, embedded private speech, and self-regulatory utterances of second language (L2) learners. Drawing on a case analysis of adult L2 learner's private speech and making use of a qualitative content analysis, the present paper sheds more light on private speech in L2, illustrating its self-regulatory and mediating role in cases such as: 1) finding a point to start, 2) commitment and internal locus of control, 3) decision making, 4) self-addressed questions and guiding behavior.

**Keywords:** inner speech, private speech, egocentric speech, Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, regulation

### INTRODUCTION

The roots of the notion of private speech lie in the works of Piaget and Vygotsky, contemporaneous scholars early this century. Both were developmental psychologists interested in the origins and processes of cognitive development. Both were interested in the children's use of the speech to self, a phenomenon that they agreed on. However, they disagreed sharply on the role this kind of speech (private speech) played in one's cognitive development. In fact, the term *private* speech is essentially a Vygotskian point of view; Piaget called it *egocentric* speech. Their different approaches to this phenomenon (i.e., speech to self) highlighted their fundamental differences about how human cognitive development proceeds.

## THEORETICAL ROOTS

Piaget (1962) observed that activities of three to eight year old kindergarten children and discovered such instances of speech as verbal repetitions of another individual, monologues (i.e., verbal soliloquy) during an activity, and non-reciprocal remarks in collective settings. In these instances, their speech was not directed towards other individuals. In Piaget's mind, it showed evidence of egocentrism, a sign of cognitive immaturity, an inability to share the perspective of another individual. However, he argued, as the children grow old they increasingly socialize with others and their speech becomes communicative. Their speech moves away from being self- to other-oriented, a sign that they are able to adopt the perspectives of others. Around the age of seven or eight, a child overcomes egocentrism by beginning to think critically and logically, and egocentric speech fades away.

In short, according to Piaget cognitive development proceeds from being individual and self-centered to social and other-directed. He believes from the genetic point of view, we must start from the child's activity; this activity is unquestionably egocentric and egotistical. The social instinct is late in developing. The first critical stage occurs at the age of seven or eight, and it is precisely at this age that we can place the first period of reflection and logical unification (Piaget, 1962).

Vygotsky (1986), on the other hand, believed that cognitive development proceeds from being social to individual. In other words, a child's cognitive development originates in socialization activities (e.g., mother-child interactions) and then goes through a process of increasing individuation. To quote him (Vygotsky, 1986):

The earliest speech of child is ... essentially social. At first it is global and multifunctional; later its functions become differentiated. At a certain age the social speech of the child is quite sharply divided into egocentric speech and communicative speech....Egocentric speech, splintered off from general social speech, in time leads to inner speech, which serves both autistic and logical thinking. (p. 165)

He argued that the phenomenon of self-directed speech did not show any cognitive immaturity but some form of development. Private speech (i.e., self-directed speech) represents a functional differentiation in the speech of a child. In other words, the child begins to differentiate between speech that is directed towards the others and speech that is self-directed. The latter assumes important cognitive functions, such as, planning, monitoring, guiding oneself while engaging in various activities. As the child grows old, this self-directed speech is transformed into silent inner speech.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to Vygotsky (1981):

Any higher mental function necessarily goes through an external stage in its development because it is initially a social function . . . Any higher

mental function was external because it was social at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental function. (p.162)

In the earliest stage of human life, the development of higher psychological functions appears on the social plane, i.e. in semiotically mediated interaction with adult caregivers or other knowledgeable members of the child's culture. The transfer of functions from the social (or interpsychological) domain to the cognitive (or intrapsychological) plane occurs within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is defined as the difference between the child's developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978)

It is within the ZPD that cognitive development occurs, not only during this early stage of life but throughout one's entire life. Through interaction with others in our culture we may become self-regulated. In self-regulation, the control of one's behavior does not reside in immediate stimuli (a case of being object-regulated) nor in another person (a case of other-regulation) but rather in an internally self-generated cognitive plan. Not being a permanent level of development, self-regulation is relative to specific tasks and is best characterized as the attainment of an individual's potential for development in innumerable endeavors realized through complex interactions with others in one's culture, mediated principally by language.

Through linguistic interaction with parents, older siblings, teachers, and the like, a child internalizes the cognitive abilities of previous generations (Berk, 1992). As children develop, they begin to use speech to attempt to regulate their own learning processes; that is, social speech develops into private speech, referred to by Vygotsky as egocentric speech, speech for oneself, "on its way inward, intimately tied up with the ordering of the child's behavior, already partly incomprehensible to others, yet still overt in form" (Vygotsky 1986, p. 138). While psycholinguists, psychologists and philosophers of language have long recognized the existence of self-directed speech, sociocultural theory assigns this type of linguistic performance a central role in the development and organization of mental functioning. Sociocultural theory holds that cognitive development is fundamentally a socially mediated process, in which the mediational link between the social and mental worlds is provided, in large part, by language, as it evolves from social speech to private speech, which in turn develops into inner speech.

Vygotsky (1962) explains that inner speech is not the interior aspect of external speech, it is a function in itself. It still remains speech, i.e. thought connected with words. But while in external speech thought is embodied in words, in inner speech words die as they bring forth thought. Inner speech is to a large extent thinking in pure meanings. It is a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and thought, the two more or less stable more or less firmly delineated components of verbal thought.

Once private speech is transformed into inner speech, speech to oneself in the form of private speech often resurfaces in problematic circumstances. This is significant, for as

Vygotsky (1962) observed when speaking of private speech in its earliest form; it is accessible to observation and experimentation:

It is still vocalized, audible speech, i.e. external in its mode of expression, but at the same time inner speech in function and structure. To study an internal process it is necessary to externalize it experimentally, by connecting it with some outer activity: only then is objective functional analysis possible. (p. 132)

Thus, for sociocultural theory, analysis of private speech has a central role in understanding how the mind functions. In this regard, sociocultural theory makes two important claims regarding the phenomenon of private speech. First, even though it is often social or communicative in appearance, it is psychological in function. That is, private speech is directed by the self as speaker to the self as listener. In the early stages of child development, private speech functions more in describing and naming certain aspects of children's actions and their environment than with planning and directing action (Wertsch, 1985). As children mature, private speech takes on a planning, directive, and evaluative function, and tends to precede and follow actions rather than co-occur with them.

Second, private speech is normally more abbreviated than social speech. According to Vygotsky (1986), the principal distinguishing feature of inner speech is the lack of psychological subject and the presence of psychological predicates. Wertsch (1985) explains that psychological subject has to do with what an utterance is about and what is already in (or readily accessible to) the mind of the listener, while psychological predicate is what is new, what is said about the (psychological) subject.

Wertsch (1985) also points out that Vygotsky's distinction here is quite close to Chafe's (1976) well-known distinction between given and new information. Wertsch's (1985) research on puzzle-solving behaviors in children, however, calls into question a strong interpretation of Vygotsky's claim. While the children in his study often produced predicative utterances like "Next a white" when directing themselves to search for a white piece to complete the puzzle, they also frequently generated syntactically fuller utterances, such as "I need a little one like this one" or "The next . . . next is . . . will be yellow"-utterances combining new as well as given information (Wertsch, 1985).

## **PRIVATE SPEECH IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ADULTS**

There have been a growing number of studies of private speech and inner speech in the second language literature. Private speech was the focus of Frawley and Lantolf (1985) and Lantolf and Frawley (1984), which are pioneering studies of second language learners performing picture narration tasks, and of Saville-Troike's (1988) study of children manipulating L2 forms in their private speech that were later used in their social speech. Subsequent studies (e.g. McCafferty, 1992; Donato, 2000; Ohta, 1995) have revealed the emergence and mediational function of private speech in several second language learning contexts.

Numerous studies of classroom learner interaction have noticed the emergence of private speech in communicative situations in which students are supposed to be exchanging communicative messages. Studies of classroom interaction among ESL and FL learners in college-level classes engaged in various collaborative activities found that language use in these types of situations is not restricted to the exchange of information. Learners also use language for strategic purposes, one of which is to mediate their own activity through private speech (Platt and Brooks, 1994; Brooks, Donato and McGlone, 1997; Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Buckwalter 2001).

Additionally, Winsler et al. (2003) studied the effectiveness of private talk in regulating one's thought and found that more than 95% of adults talk to themselves; moreover, he categorized the findings of some studies on private speech some of which are presented below:

- 1) Adult second language learners use private speech in L1 in learning contexts to help them acquire L2;
- 2) Private speech in L2 for the service of learning among adult L2 learners is more common in advanced learners than in beginning L2 students;
- 3) There are cross cultural/linguistic differences in how, and how much, adult L2 learners use private speech for language learning;
- 4) Children use more private speech in open-ended and creative activities than in closed-ended, goal-directed activities; Age differences in children's private speech use in naturalistic settings can be due to the classroom context changing with age rather than child age per se.

More importantly, John-Steiner (1992) provides an excellent overview of some settings in which the use of private speech by adults has been observed. She identifies three main contexts: thinking aloud speech, embedded private speech, and self-regulatory utterances of second language learners. Furthermore, she distinguishes between spoken and written private speech.

According to John-Steiner, most research using the thinking aloud procedure collects data from laboratory settings and artificial tasks. She and another researcher collected data on private speech from naturalistic settings, e.g., spontaneous talks among couples engaged in such leisurely activities as learning voluntarily how to making sandals in a craft shop. They discovered that the subjects produced utterances that seemed to function as verbal exploration of a problem or situation. They concluded that these utterances are produced when subjects faced unfamiliar or difficult tasks. The utterances provide a channel for self expression 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. A frequently cited example of an unfamiliar task that may produce private speech is when somebody is acquiring computer skills.

According to (John-Steiner, 1992), embedded private speech refers to utterances that occur in public performance settings, e.g., public lectures or classroom lectures. Often, an

experienced lecturer in the course of delivering a lecture will use language for the self, e.g., "Let's see, where was I?" Utterances of this kind help are mental acts that help an individual shift, reorganize, plan, and achieve focus in his/her presentation.

The use of private speech can also be observed among adults learning a second language. Because the learners have to perform tasks in a language in which they lack mastery, they would resort to self-directed utterances. A frequently cited example is the task of constructing a story from a given set of pictures, in which learners would say (McCafferty, 1990, as cited in John-Steiner, 1992, p. 290):

- I don't know the name of this ... Hats
- I don't know what to say.... There are five monkeys ...
- Ah, what do I say about this one? Ah, the five monkeys?

Finally, John-Steiner (1992), in making a distinction between spoken and written private speech, calls the latter inner speech writing that functions as telegrams for the self." She refers here to highly condensed writing (or jottings of the minds) in the notebooks of writers and record books of scientists. John-Steiner's reference to McCafferty's (1990) study is a good example of how the investigation of private speech in the form of self-directed utterances provides a useful approach in L2 research.

## **THIS STUDY**

The study is framed through a qualitative research methodology of iterative process (Dornyei, 2007) in which data collection and data analysis is revised based on emergent themes. An adult L2 learner was requested to verbalize his private speech considering the issues which he likes to think about them. The participant thought about the problems that he had with regard to his exam and family and consequently he reflected upon finding ways to overcome those problems. And the verbalization was recorded and transcribed for the sake of data analysis. The relevant episodes were selected for the sake of discussion.

In the following section, I will bring utterances to illustrate the self-regulatory and mediating role of using L2 as private speech with justifications and interpretations from Vygotskian sociocultural perspective.

## **RESULTS**

For the matter of data analysis certain utterances were extracted to illustrate how L2 private speech can perform functions such as self-regulation and mediation and more specifically releasing effective load. The following utterances highlight the self-regulatory and mediating role of L2 private speech.

## Finding a point to start

### ➤ Utterance 1

*I said ok, no problem with that.*

For sure it has happened to you as well. Thinking about a problem, you tried to accept certain factors the way they are and took them for granted in that nothing could be done about them. The self regulatory point of this utterance is the sense that the learner tries to organize his mind considering what should be taken for granted and not be further reflected upon. The utterance 'I said ok, no problem with that' shows that the learner is willing to accept the issue the way it is. This sense of regulation provides its mediating role in that it helps the learner to find a place or a point to start considering other alternatives.

## Commitment and internal locus of control

### ➤ Utterance 2

*This term is a must for me and I should shoot my grades up.*

### ➤ Utterance 3

*I need to give a push in this regard.*

The next issue considering the self-regulatory function of private speech is the sort of decision making in which individuals commit themselves to do or not to do something henceforth. Utterance 2 shows that the learner finds something for example the term as a must and consequently commits himself in that he has to 'shoot my[his] grades up'. What's more, such commitment is also repeated in utterance 3 in that the learner commits himself to 'give a push'. More interestingly, is the locus of control provided by private speech. In utterance 3, we see that the learner believes that he *needs* to do something which can be considered as a piece of evidence corroborating the notion of internal locus of control in which the person finds considers his own share considering the existence of a problem and consequently commits himself to take some measurements in this regard. Utterances 2 and 3 are considered as self-regulatory in function in that they both provide the learner with a clearer picture of the problem at hand which consequently mediates the process of finding solutions.

## Decision making

### ➤ Utterance 4

*The way I implored didn't work.*

### ➤ Utterance 5

*All these things will get me nowhere.*

### ➤ Utterance 6

*..., I will find myself in hot water.*

### ➤ Utterance 7

*I just made up my mind.*

➤ Utterance 8

*I think it would be miles better.*

The next point considering the self-regulatory and mediating role of private speech is providing a process by which learners arrive at a state of more calculate decision making. In utterance 4, the learner evaluates one of his previously measurement which he believes that it did not worked well. Then in utterance 5, once again, he finds all his previous actions and decisions as inefficient and unsuccessful in that he believes they '*will get me [him] nowhere*'. More importantly, in utterance 6, the learner finds the situation quite critical and he realizes in case of continuing this process, he would find himself in state of uneasiness in an immediate future '*finding myself [himself] in hot water*'. Having a carefully analyzed the previously taken measurements and considering their efficiency and consequences, in the learner tries to do decision making '*I just made up my mind*' (Utterance 7). Additionally, the learner tries to make an evaluation of his decision making in that he believes what he has decided to do '*would be miles better*' (Utterance 8). All of the above discussed utterances demonstrate the way in which private speech functioned as self-regulatory and mediating considering a process of, for instance, decision making.

### **Self-addressed questions and guiding behavior**

➤ Utterance 9

*So, why do you do this, why?!*

➤ Utterance 10

*Is there such a person to marry me?!*

The next feature of L2 private speech is the self-addressed questions which are observed in the utterances. Such a feature has also been previously acknowledged by Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) in their study of peer review sessions in an ESL writing course. They reported that private speech emerged as a mediating strategy that facilitated the revision process. The authors identified two main purposes in their students' use of private speech. One was to guide their own behavior by means of repetitions, self-addressed questions and self-reminders. The other was to release affective load by saying, privately, interjections and 'self-chastising comments' such as "Québruta!" (How dumb of me!). Utterances 9 and 10 are quite revealing considering asking self-directed questions by the learner to guide his own behavior.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Considering the self-regulatory and mediating role of private speech and more specifically L2 private speech, the present study could find pieces of evidence which were indicative of the private speech's mediating and self-regulatory function as in 1) Finding a point to start, 2) Commitment and internal locus of control, 3) Decision making, 4) Self-addressed questions and guiding behavior, in which the participants tried to make use of



all the aforementioned self-regulatory and mediating strategies to get control of his actions and consequently guiding his own behavior.

The self-regulatory function of private speech has also been underlined by Donato (2000) as well. Donato (2000) asserts that private speech is stimulated by the social context and it is seen to have a self-regulatory function and to promote linguistic development and the internalization of collective knowledge.

In a similar way, Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) in their study of peer review sessions in an ESL writing course. They found private speech emerged as a mediating strategy that facilitated the revision process. They also identified two main purposes in their students' use of private speech. One was to guide their own behavior by means of repetitions, self-addressed questions and self-reminders. The other was to release affective load.

In a similar way, the present study has also found the self-directed utterances (Utterances 9 and 10), whether in the form statements or questions, self-regulatory and mediating in that they helped the learner to talk to his own self and consequently controlling and guiding his future actions and behavior.

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