

Inner Speech and Language Learning

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This article seeks to introduce the concept of native language (L1) Inner Speech and to touch on how our knowledge of the nature and characteristics of L1 Inner Speech could be utilized in second language (L2) learning.

The article will first focus on a 'definition' of Inner Speech by examining the relation between thought and language and the specific characteristics of Inner Speech. In addition to a text-based discussion, visual illustrations and tasks are included in the hope of giving the reader a chance to pause and examine his/her own Inner Speech in the course of reading this paper.

The article will conclude with some preliminary suggestions of how the concepts of Inner Speech could be introduced to L2 learners with the long-term aim of trying to develop L2 Inner Speech.

What is Inner Speech ?

Thought and Language

The recognition that we have internal, silent dialogues with ourselves whilst we are thinking has been acknowledged for centuries ; however, the most notable proponent of the theory of Inner Speech in modern times is the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's investigations of L1 Inner Speech began shortly after the Russian Revolution during the early Soviet times until his death in 1934. Unfortunately, his theories did not become widely known to the outside world until his works were translated and published many years after his death. Though Vygotsky is recognized for his major contributions

to the theory of L1 Inner Speech, there has been considerable debate about the definition of Inner Speech.

One of the core issues in the debate concerns the relationship between thought and language. Are they separate, independent modules or dependent on each other? The viewpoints for both sides of the argument are quite varied and beyond the scope of this paper; however, I will include a few examples of the diverse positions taken on the question.

Fodor (1975) would argue that language and thought are separate and that “the language of thought” is not our L1, but rather ‘Mentalese’, an innate metalanguage in which our cognitive processes are carried out.

Fodor’s theory of Mentalese might be regarded as the extreme position, but the author of this paper would like to give three simple examples of the position supported by Fodor and others that language and thought are not one and the same.

For the first example, we can look to the animal world. Animals do think and learn, yet they do not have a language (i.e. similar to our human language) that can be used to aid or develop their thoughts. We can also see this same phenomenon in humans. Prelinguistic babies (approximately before the age of two) also think, but their thinking is nonverbal. Finally, even humans who are fully mature linguistically and intellectually think without using language to form their thoughts and also use language without thinking. If you suddenly drop a glass of water on the floor, language may result in the form of a verbal outcry—“Oops”—but the use of language is not necessary for the initial thought derived from an emotional, automatic reaction. The last two examples could be interpreted by Vygotsky’s definition of “lower, natural mental processes” which have not been “transformed into higher mental functions by language” (in de Guerrero, 2005, p. 17).

Although Vygotsky (1986) accepted the separation of language and thought, as seen in the thoughts of babies and the “mindless speech” of

adults (1986, p. 250), he differs from Fodor's concept of Mentalese in the sense that Vygotsky sees Inner Speech as being the place where thought and language meet and complement each other.

Characteristics of Inner Speech

What is it like ?

Many models of the process beginning with “the first dim stirring of a thought” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 217) to speech production for others or even for oneself (external speech) have been proposed. In addition to Vygotsky, Luria (1973) and Vocate (1994) have outlined the various steps involved. This section of the paper will look at the general characteristics of the development of thought to speech seen in the different models presented by these scholars and others.

Before discussing the details of the models, one important point should be mentioned. The development from thought to word is not a neat, linear phenomenon. In the process of putting our thoughts together, we are continuously moving back and forth between “thought to word and from word to thought” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 218). With this point in mind, let's examine the nature and characteristics of this very private, un-observable role of Inner Speech in the process.

The first step is the stimulus for the thought process to begin. In other words, we need a motive for thinking, which may come from a variety of sources, such as personal needs or from a social situation we find ourselves involved in. Then we try to put these vague thoughts together.

In the beginning, these thoughts may be lurking in our subconscious and the only expression we have of them may be a non-verbal image in our mind or an emotion. As the process continues, unique, personal ‘sounds’—words or any other type of sound—may emerge silently in our head. We talk to ourselves silently and hear that voice. In a sense, we can hear ourselves think.

This brings us to the type of language we use in our Inner Speech.

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Since Inner Speech is private and not intended for others, it is very brief and different from the speech we use for external, public speech. Syntax is greatly reduced since we know what we are thinking about so there is no need to be as precise or complete as would be required in speech for others. For example, the subject of our thoughts is known to us, so we can omit pronouns such as ‘I’ or ‘she ’ etc. in our Inner Speech.

Similarly, the words we use in our Inner Speech have very powerful associations that capture a range of senses or experiences. To draw an analogy, the saying that “A picture tells a thousand words” testifies to the impact of one source of stimulation, visual or otherwise, which can convey so much. That is, we do not need to use many words in Inner Speech because our semantic choices are condensed into relatively few words which evoke rich meaning and significance.

Inner Speech Tasks

At this point, I would like to give you the reader the opportunity to look at your own Inner Speech by means of two tasks. The first task requires very little language to process since it involves interpreting the visual image below. Therefore, whether your L1 is English, Japanese



or another language, this task gives everyone the experience of L1 Inner Speech.

Please remember that the key point is to try and monitor your thinking as you approach the task from the beginning and through the process of arriving at an answer.

Task One : What do you see ?

Discussion

Since Inner Speech is so vague and impressionistic, it is very difficult to draw 'a portrait' to illustrate what goes on in our minds during this thinking process. Nevertheless, I have attempted to capture some of the elements in my Inner Speech when I dealt with Task One as seen on the following page.

An Inner Speech Portrait

In this simplified 'portrait,' some of the important features of Inner Speech can be seen. First, Inner Speech is not only made up of words, but also images (the eye, nose, and rabbit), mental states (??? symbolizing confusion) and emotions (*Hah, hah, hah!*).

Furthermore, the brevity and personal nature of Inner Speech syntax and semantics make it very difficult for others to understand us even if our Inner Speech could be heard. Although you the reader know the context of my Inner Speech, you do not know what was confusing to me, whether I was laughing happily or sarcastically, or to what "*Yeah!*" referred. Of course, it was all perfectly clear to me.

Task Two serves two purposes. First, it gives you another opportunity to examine your Inner Speech with a very different type of problem from the visual illusion in the first task. Task Two also acts as a bridge to the final section of this article. It is quite evident that this task is based on processing language to get an answer, but it also raises the issue of L2 Inner Speech. In other words, can we really think in a second language? Can we develop an L2 Inner Speech?

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No, Beak.

Duck.

???

Left.

Up.

Right!



Rabbit!

Hah, hah, hah!

Cute.

Easier?

Yeah!

Before we move on to address this issue, please devote your attention to finding an answer to Task Two first. An English version of this problem is in the Appendix of this paper. If you are bilingual in Japanese and English, do the task in your L2 first and then in your L1. After that, compare your Inner Speech experiences in both languages. For example, how much were you relying on your L1 when you were trying to solve the problem in your L2? Did you ‘think’ in your L2? If you did, how often and when did you do so?

Task Two: Climbing Up the Well

蜘蛛が10 フィート (3.05 メートル) 下の井戸に落ちます。蜘蛛は毎日昼間に2 フィート (60.96 センチ) ずつ井戸をよじ登りますが、夜には1 フィート (30.48 センチ) ずつ下にずり落ちてしまいます。

- 蜘蛛が井戸のてっぺんまで着くには何日かかりますか。

The answer to this task appears at the end of the References section of the paper, though please keep in mind that the experience of trying to get an answer and reflecting on our Inner Speech is more important than getting the right answer!

Inner Speech and Second Language Learning

In the introduction to his paper, Tomlinson (2000) writes :

In learning a native language (L1), the inner voice develops naturally at the same time as the external voice. But in learning an L2 formally, the emphasis is often on the immediate development of an external voice. Many learners fail to develop an effective L2 Inner Voice and are therefore handicapped in their attempt to understand and produce the L2 intelligently and creatively.

Tomlinson uses the term ‘Inner Voice’ rather than Inner Speech, and it can be said that the terms are not inter-changeable. Nonetheless, Tomlinson states that he is referring to the importance of “the phenomenon of producing speech sounds in the mind” (p. 125) in second language learning.

Although Waters (2006) does not specifically mention Inner Speech or Inner Voice, he does stress the importance of thinking for language learning and bemoans the lack of activities that encourage “a range of thinking levels” (p. 319) and states :

One possible reason for this situation may be a lack of awareness about the ways in which the thinking level of activities can be conceptualized, and the implications for lesson design.

So how can we develop our students’ L2 Inner Speech and thinking abilities? Both Tomlinson and Waters have identified various areas

and techniques—such as problem-solving tasks similar to Tasks One and Two in the previous section, Inner Speech Tasks. Once again, a detailed discussion of practical classroom applications is beyond the parameters of this paper. However, this writer will report on specific areas and activities used with his learners to develop their L2 Inner Speech and thinking skills in a future paper.

In the meantime, perhaps the first step in this process is to raise our learners' awareness of Inner Speech and how it can be applied to their second language learning. Although we know that we 'talk to ourselves,' we often do not focus on the specific nature and possible uses of our inner dialogues.

To begin the process of heightened awareness, this writer provided his third and fourth-year Japanese university students with the following simple definitions of L2 Inner Speech and some situations where it can be used in their English language studies. In some cases, what follows may be considered Inner Voice with its pedagogical orientation rather than pure Inner Speech but to repeat Tomlinson's words earlier in this paper, all references are to those "speech sounds" in our minds regardless of the label we give them.

An Introduction to Inner Speech in English

What is Inner Speech ?

- Inner Speech (IS) is any type of language in English that 'happens in your mind'.

- It is English 'inside your head' that is not spoken to other people at the time it happens.

- IS includes sounds, words, phrases, sentences, dialogues or even conversations in English.

How can we use it Inner Speech language learning ?

Use IS while you are listening or reading.

- Repeat a word or phrase you hear or read several times in your

head or in a low voice.

Use IS after you have written or said something.

- Ask yourself about your accuracy (grammar/vocabulary) or clarity (meaning, pronunciation).

Use IS to get ready to speak.

- Plan a future conversation before you have it.

Use IS when you are just ‘thinking to yourself’ (with no plans to communicate with others).

- Imagine conversations or describe things and events in English.

Conclusion

This paper first sought to provide a brief overview of the nature and characteristics of our L1 Inner Speech and the important role it plays in the process of developing our thoughts and transforming those thoughts into external speech.

The focus then turned to a discussion of the potential applications of our knowledge of L1 Inner Speech to language learning. Is it possible to develop an effective L2 Inner Speech? If so, how can the concepts of Inner Speech be presented to second language learners and what L2 Inner Speech activities can be incorporated into our teaching?

In order to address these questions, the author included a sample paper given to students which provided them with a simple definition of L2 Inner Speech and examples of its relevancy and application to different language learning situations. Examples of L2 Inner Speech activities were illustrated by two tasks which readers were asked to complete.

A future paper by this author will present a detailed description of an L2 Inner Speech instructional approach and activities which were designed to give learners the opportunity to draw upon their own thinking abilities and creativity in their second language learning.

Appendix

Task Two : Climbing Up the Well

A spider falls to the bottom of a 10-foot (3.05 metre) well.

The spider climbs up two feet (60.96 cm) every day, but every night it slides back down one foot (30.48 cm).

How many days will it take the spider to get to the top of the well?

References

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Task Two Answer

Nine days.

- The net gain after each **day and night** is one foot (climbs two feet, loses one), so that after eight **days**, the spider will be eight feet up.
- On the ninth day, the spider will climb the last two feet to the top of the well **before nightfall**.