

A Closer Look at Different Aspects of Private Speech in SLA

Morteza Montazeri

Department of English Language, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

Hadi Hamidi

Department of English Language, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

Bahman Hamidi

Department of English, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mazandaran, Iran

Abstract—Private speech is defined as the self-talk which many children in particular engage in. It leads to the inner speech that more mature individuals use to control thought and behavior. The claim in private speech is that some learners who undergo silent period engage in private conversations with themselves, which prepares them for social speech later. Private speech eventually turns to inner speech with no external articulation. Accordingly, speech comes to reflect an advance on the earliest uses of language which are social and interpersonal. Cognitive development makes it necessary for the child to move from reliance on others to reliance on his inner speech, where the control over his mental functioning takes place. Since private speech is claimed to be a universal strategy for L1 learners, a scrutiny in its dimensions would probably be beneficial for second language studies. Therefore, the present paper briefly introduces and talks about different aspects of the private speech which might be found interesting in second language studies.

Index Terms—egocentric speech, inner speech, private speech, second language acquisition

I. HISTORY OF THE PRIVATE SPEECH

The term ‘private speech’ is coined by Flavell (1966) to replace Piaget’s ‘egocentric speech’, inability to view the world from another’s point of view (Mitchell & Myles, 2004) or a vocalized form of inner speech (Johnson, 2004; Lantolf, 2011). Private speech is defined by Saville-Troike (2006) as “the self-talk which many children (in particular) engage in that leads to the inner speech that more mature individuals use to control thought and behavior” (p. 114). However, Saville-Troike (2006) makes a distinction between inner speech, a use of language in order to regulate inner thought (Mitchell & Myles, 2004), and private talk by contending that while inner speech is not necessarily tied to surface forms of any specific language, private speech is verbalized in first or/and second language. Private speech can pave the way for a better observation of interpersonal interactions occurring in language and discovering its function in SLA, thereby drawing a great deal of attention in SLA research. Ohta (2001, cited in Ellis, 2005) defines private speech as audible speech which is not adapted to an addressee, taking some forms including “imitation, mental rehearsal, and vicarious response which is a response that a learner produces to question the teacher has addressed to another learner” (p. 49). Donato (1994, cited in De Almeida Mattos, 2000) also defines private speech as a means of self-guidance in performing an activity beyond one’s current level of competence. Besides, Regarding rehearsal, Broner and Tarone (2001) state that in private speech rehearsal has a lot in common with L2 learning strategies, they are conscious and unconscious things that L2 learners do to master the second language” (p. 366). Besides, according to Vygotsky (1978, cited in Woodward-Kron, 2002), children use private speech to clarify and repeat the instruction they have been given in completing a language task. A certain amount of, according to Woodward-Kron (2002), is to be expected of children and can be considered as a sign that they are engaged with the task.

As stated by Ellis (2008), the claim in private speech is that some learners go who undergo silent period engage in private conversations with themselves, which prepares them for social speech later. Besides, Mitchell and Myles (2004) state that private speech in sociocultural theory is considered as evidence of a child’s growing ability to regulate his or her own behavior. For Vygotsky, private speech eventually turns to inner speech with no external articulation (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Thus, as argued by Mitchell and Myles (2004), private speech comes to reflect an advance on the earliest uses of language, “which are social and interpersonal” (p. 198). The autonomous individual as Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue, has developed inner speech as a tool of thought and feels no further need to formulate external private speech, unless in tackling a new task, when they may accommodate and regulate their efforts with a private monologue.

According to Johnson (2004), the child can move from reliance on others to reliance on his inner speech through cognitive development, where the control over his mental functioning occurs. Private speech, as Johnson (2004) asserts, provides the child with metacognitive tools such as guiding, monitoring, and planning of activity that goes beyond the

child's current level of cognitive development. Johnson (2004) further maintains that private speech is applied within paradigm of Vygotsky as a discursive developmental mechanism enabling children to guide themselves in performing a problem-solving activity that is beyond their current level of development. Likewise, Zuengler and Miller (2006, p. 39) maintain that private speech mediates mental behavior and manifests the process in which external and social forms of interaction fit inner speech or mental development.

The spoken form of language serves two major functions: to communicate with others and to engage in the talk to oneself (Patrick & Abravanel, 2000; Ziglari, 2008). Private speech, speaking to and for oneself, has according to Patrick and Abravanel (2000), an internal aspect that we experience phenomenally as the basic vehicle for thinking privately. It also has an external aspect that we experience as overt speech aimed at the self than communicating with others (Patrick & Abravanel, 2000). As argued by Patrick and Abravanel (2000), Vygotsky postulated a developmental sequence in which external private speech precedes external private speech, and the latter presumably requires advances in cognitive, speech act, and dialog functioning so as to make it possible. They contend that the precise mechanisms which are responsible for the internalization "have eluded direct investigation, but differentiation of truly social speech from overt speech for the self is said to be prerequisite" (p. 45).

According to McCafferty (2004), the study of private speech in L2 learning has encompassed a number of other dimensions including: cross-cultural differences in the use of private speech, an exploration of the degree to which internalization of a second language can occur, the importance of applying L1 forms of private speech in collaborative problem-solving activities, the role of private speech in language play, the gestures that accompany private speech and what they convey, the forms and functions of private writing, and facilitating the use of private speech in language class (McCafferty, 2004). Because the essential function of language play is rehearsal for the mastery of new form of second language, the need for advanced learners to engage in language play dwindles or is eliminated (Broner & Tarone, 2001). Rehearsal, as a type of private speech, as stated by Broner and Tarone (2001), is not a performance for others but is addressed to oneself, even if it is considered as a preparation for more public performance. Rehearsal is focused on imperfectly mastered language forms and is aimed at mastery of language norms, not their violation (Broner & Tarone, 2001).

Private speech is social in genesis and may, hence, be social or communicative in its appearance, but it is nonetheless psychological in terms of function (Anton & McCamilla, 1999). According to Anton and McCamilla (1999), private speech is speech which is directed towards the self for the aim of organizing and directing one's or more specifically a language learner's mental activity. Berducci (2004), furthermore, states that private speech is the speech self, used to control the self, while making its attempt to perform the task alone. Private speech, according to Berducci (2004), originates in external speech "as the voice of a teacher, caretaker, parent, and so on during some type of training" (p. 332). He further maintains that the speech form is more abbreviated than either written speech or external speech, because a speaker is cognizant of the fact that it is the self who is speaking. Private speech comprises both an internal form and an external form. "inner speech follows" (Berducci, 2004, p. 333). It is, as explained by Berducci (2004), comprised of spoken thought and is more abbreviated and predicted the preceding forms. Abbreviation and prediction both increase as we move down the continuum to the final components, thought and motivation (Berducci, 2004). According to Berducci (2004), thought is assumed to be more abbreviated than inner speech while motivation is considered as the most abbreviated form of all speech forms on the continuum.

II. NONVERBAL LANGUAGE AND PRIVATE SPEECH

It is argued by McCafferty (2004) that gesture has obtained its own status as an interpersonal tool for learning language, regarding the fact that the interpersonal use of gesture is a very recent area of research in relation to second language learning. Furthermore, McCafferty (1998, cited in Lazaraton, 2004) investigated the role that nonverbal behavior plays in second language learners' speech. He was interested in how nonverbal forms of behavior, such as gazing, posture, and gesture, work as self-regulators in private speech defined by him as vocalized forms of speech for the self-functioning metacognitively to help language learner plane, monitor, and guide a set of activity. In his study, McCafferty (1998, cited in Lazaraton, 2004) found that both cultural and proficiency differences in the nonverbal behavior which are applied and gestures which are alongside private speech are integrated with language speakers' efforts made at self-expression.

According to Cohen (1994), while certain cognitive operations that students do in classroom are nonverbal, involving symbols and relations, many of them are verbalized, whether in the form of inner or private speech or in the form of social public speech. As Cohen (1994) maintains, inner speech is abrupt and is governed by predicate. It is often unintelligible since referents are unclear speech almost without words. "One word in inner speech is saturated with sense to such an extent that it would require many words in external speech to explain it" (Cohen, 1994, p. 173).

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIVATE SPEECH

The fact that private speech is the internalization of social speech turns it into the most complicated form of speech (Lantolf & Frawley, 1984, cited in Centeno-Cortes & Jimenez Jimenez, 2004). The nature of private speech, contrary to what it seems, is dialogic rather than monologic (Centeno-Cortes & Jimenez Jimenez, 2004). In the private speech, as

argued by Centeno-Cortes and Jimenez Jimenez (2004), not all the information becomes explicit, and words do not need to be fully pronounced, because of the fact that they can be understood by the intention to utter them. However, as they contend, not only is phonology reduced, might also the morphosyntactic features may also undergo abbreviation. For example known information, such as the grammatical subject, are omitted and other information mentioned for the first time might be preceded by a definite article or expressed in the form of a pronoun (cited in Centeno-Cortes & Jimenez Jimenez, 2004). However, Frawley (1997, cited in Centeno-Cortes & Jimenez Jimenez, 2004) argues that it is not relevant to make a distinction between new and given information, because he believes the goal of private speech to be keeping the focus on the task.

This form reduction is compensated for by semantic richness (Centeno-Cortes & Jimenez Jimenez, 2004). Vygotsky (1986, cited in Centeno-Cortes & Jimenez Jimenez (2004) distinguishes between the sense of a word and its meaning. Meaning is decontextualized while sense is put in the context where the word is produced, “to the extent that the new senses are created every time the word is uttered” (p. 10). “In private speech, sense predominates over meaning, and the deeper underground private speech goes, the more predominance sense has” (Vygotsky, 1986, cited in Centeno-Cortes & Jimenez Jimenez, 2004, p. 10), thus allowing for concluding that in extreme cases, private speech becomes pure sense and, as a consequence, it is situated in a way that if it were to be heard by a person not conversant with that particular situation, it could be completely incomprehensible.

IV. FUNCTIONS OF PRIVATE SPEECH

Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory shows great progress in both first and second language acquisition studies, since unlike Chomsky who considers the role of environment solely as a trigger in language development, Vygotsky regards its role as of high significance in the development of child language. Vygotsky’s theory is embraced by many SLA scholars in that many aspects of language learning are related to interactional and psychological issues rather than being purely linguistic factors!

DiCamilla and Anton (2004) state that sociocultural theory makes two important claims regarding the phenomenon of private speech. First, although private speech is often social and communicative in appearance, it is psychological in function, which means that private speech is directed by the self as the speaker to the self as a listener. In the early stages of child development, as argued by DiCamilla and Anton (2004), private speech functions more in naming and describing specific aspects of children’s actions and their environment than with planning and directing actions, and as children mature, “private speech takes on planning, directive, and evaluative function, and tends to precede and follow actions rather than co-occur with them” (p. 39). Second, private speech is more abbreviated than social speech. According to Vygotsky (1986, cited in McCamilla and Anton, 2004), the major distinguishing feature of inner speech is dearth of psychological subject and existence of psychological predicates. It is explained by Wertsch (1979, cited in McCamilla & Anton, 2004) that the psychological subject has to deal with what an utterance is about and what is already in the mind of listener, “while psychological predicate is new, what is said about the (psychological) subject” (p.39).

It is argued by Lantolf (2006) that private speech is responsible for both regulating mental ability in complex tasks and facilitating internalization of mental ability. It is also claimed by Diaz (1992, cited in Winsler, Femyhough, & Way, 2005) that the function of private speech goes back to the possibility of the consequence of the utterance for the learner’s ongoing behavior. Winsler et al (2005) further report the following nine functions of private speech identified by Furrow (1992):

- 1- Engaging/regulatory, consisting of a combination of the regulatory, attentional, and interactional categories
- 2- Self-regulatory, which includes utterances referring to an event that might be immediately carried out
- 3- Expressive, containing an evaluative expression or opinion of an internal state
- 4- referential, which refers to a present object of a present event that does not appear to involve the child
- 5- descriptive of activity, referring to ongoing event in which the child is involved
- 6- information seeking
- 7- imaginary, referring to utterances that are sung
- 8- informative, which includes utterances referring to non-present objects
- 9- incomprehensible, consisting of inaudible utterances that cannot be understood

V. TYPES OF PRIVATE SPEECH

Ohta (2001, cited in Mitchell & Myles, 2004) identifies three types of second language private speech. The most common type of private speech is repetition, in which language learners privately repeat the utterances of the language teacher or of another student. This type of practice is argued by Mitchell and Myles (2004) to be the most common practice with the newly lexical items being taught in the second language or with sentences that are the focus of class attention. The second type of private speech is vicarious responses, which is conducted when language learners respond privately to questions from teacher, or someone else’s utterance which is repaired or completed. The third type of private speech is manipulation. Manipulation occurs when language learners privately construct their own language utterance, “manipulating sentence structure, building up and breaking down word, and engaging in sound play” (p. 205).

Centeno-Cortes and Jimenez Jimenez (2004) also introduce private verbal thinking (PVT) as a type of private speech. They define private verbal thinking as “a particular type of private speech that surfaces during the reasoning process as a tool used in resolution of problem-solving tasks” (p. 8).

VI. INTERNALIZATION AND PRIVATE SPEECH

One of the central concepts to sociocultural theory is referred to, according to Gass and Selinker (2008), as internalization. The process of internalization allows for moving the relationship between an individual and his or her environment to later performance (Gass & Selinker, 2008). It argued by Gass and Selinker (2008) that one way internalization occurs is through imitation, known as private speech, “which can be both immediate and intentional and delayed” (p. 284). Besides, Lantolf (2006, cited in Cardenas Carlos, 2008) states that based on the studies conducted in the realm of child development, internalization of L2 features is done through imitation, but that this imitation is a significant, intentional and potentially transformative process than a mere rote mimicking. Regardless of age second language learners turn to imitation in their private speech when exposed to new linguistic affordances (Cardenas Carlos, 20087).

Belz and Reinhardt (2004) define internalization as the process through which elements of child’s inter-mental sociocultural world becomes part of his or her intra-mental private world and the process whereby individuals talk to themselves into the knowledge. The learning of foreign language forms which language learners first encounter outside in the inter-psychological plane, shows one example of internalization (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004) “i.e. knowledge moving from “out there” to “in there” (p. 328). In relation to the role language play in the internalization of L2 forms, Lantolf (2000, cited in Belz & Reinhardt, 2004) believes that the play function of private speech has the role of facilitating L2 learning, and for Lantolf (2000) language play may take the forms of talking aloud to yourself in L2, repeating phrases to yourself silently, imitating to yourself sound in L2, making up sentences or words in L2, and having random snatches of L2 pop into your head.

Private speech continues to be accessible all through a human’s lifetime (Bowles, 2010). According to Bowles (2010), through verbalization, new knowledge may be obtained, and control over attending, planning, and remembering can be achieved. In other words, as she contends, the opportunity to talk about instructional materials comes to mediate the internalization of knowledge, and for this reason, conversation analysis and sociocultural theorists view learning as something emerging through verbalization. Recent research on private speech has revealed that verbal reports through collaborative dialogs can function as a tool for learning, since the act of verbalizing is assumed to change thought processes.

Lantolf (2007) also contends that imitation, as previously stated, is a key to internalization. Tomasello (1999, cited in Lantolf, 2007) argues that imitation is not about parroting and repetition, but it is human capacity relying on our ability to decipher the intentionality that is the incentive for others’ acting. In fact, according to Lantolf (2007), “imitation is potentially a transformative act, particularly in the case of children, who have not undergone the intense pressure that schools in particular impose on us to conform to culturally sanctioned knowledge and ways of doing things” (p. 696). As noted by Tomasello (1999, cited in Lantolf, 2007), imitation not only involves physical behavior, but it also encompasses symbolic forms of mediation, including language.

VII. MEDIATION BY MEANS OF PRIVATE SPEECH

While interaction is privileged in sociocultural theory, it does not appear to be the sole way through which language activity can mediate language learning (Ellis, 2008). Ellis (2008) asserts that mediation can also be conducted through private speech. Young children most often, as he states, resort to talking to themselves even when they are with others. This self-directed speech can take the questions children ask themselves, instructions regarding what to do and what not to do, and evaluation of their performance (Ellis, 2008). Ellis (2008) states that it resembles the language used by conversationalists who are conversant with one another. Such talk, as he argues, derives from social talk, which serves the purpose of enabling the child to gain control over the mental functioning necessary in conducting an activity.

Adults also employ private speech (Ellis, 2008). According to the principles of continuous access proposed by Frawley and Lantolf (1985, cited in Buckwalter, 2001; Ellis, 2008), “adults continue to have access to the knowing strategies they have used previously” (p. 529), and in difficult situations, they are able to reactivate earlier strategies as a way to achieving self-regulation; when adults face performing a new function, they are able to utilize private speech so as to achieve self-regulation. According to Foley (1991, cited in Ellis, 2008), when an individual faces a difficult task, he externalizes the inner order to regulate himself.

Owing to the fact that private speech is intended for the speaker, not the listener, it is not circumscribed by the same norms that impact on social speech, which is evident in L2 learners in two ways (Ellis, 2008). First, L2 learners may make a resort to the use of their first language in self-directed speech. Second, if they use the second language, they may not apply target language forms even if they have internalized these. Therefore, apparent errors may be private forms that language learners sue in their attempt to keep control over the task, suggesting that to evaluate the accuracy of language learners’ distinguishing whether the talk that arises in the performance of a task is social or private is of paramount importance.

One of the chief areas of inquiry in sociocultural theory concerns the question how language serves to mediate human activity both on the psychological plane and on the intra-psychological plane (Anton & McCamilla, 1999). As Anton and DiCamilla (1999) contend, inter-psychological mediation occurs in the form of social speech while intrapsychological mediation can take the form of private speech. In the domain of intra-psychological mediation, for instance, researchers have investigated the content, elliptical, syntactic structure, and other formal linguistic properties of speech and writing directed to oneself aimed at guiding oneself through a variety of tasks (Anton & DiCamilla, 1999). Regarding the inter-psychological plane of mediation, that is the collaborative interaction of individuals, as explained by Anton and DiCamilla (1999), language researchers have studied how language of experts, or more competent interlocutors, serves the goal of moving the language learner through his or her Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to the point at which the language learner becomes self-regulated in the performance of some task. However, it is argued by Buckwalter (2001) that self-regulation does not mean mastery. In effect, during self-regulation, the discourses that originated during guided learning on the social plane and that is later internalized by the language learner or by the child is likely to surface as private speech during times of difficulty.

VIII. FEEDBACK AND PRIVATE SPEECH

Ohta (2001, cited in Iwashita, 2003) investigated the role that private speech plays as a language learner response to recast in teacher-student interaction in a Japanese language classroom. She, in particular, examined the potential effectiveness and salience of recast, defined by Richards and Schmidt (1985) as a type of negative feedback in which a more proficient interlocutor rephrases an incorrect or an incomplete learner utterance by changing one or more sentence components while still referring to the central meaning of the utterance, through occurrence of private speech (Iwashita, 2003). Ohta (2001, cited in Iwashita, 2003) explains that private speech offers better insight and sheds more light on the mental activities that language learners engage in regarding corrective feedback. In Ohta's (2001, cited in Iwashita, 2003) study, private speech also occurred after language learners' choral utterances were addressed by the teacher. Ohta (2001) argued that the fact that language learners' responses to teacher were addressed to other language learners through the private speech was evidence confirming the fact that recasts are useful and salient (Iwashita, 2003). Fine-tuned analysis, as stated by Iwashita (2003), revealed that language learners produced private speech when they responded to teacher recast which was not directly addressed to them. This type of response was, according to Iwashita (2003) named auditor response to recast. Ohta (2001, cited in Ellis, 2005) has shown that in Japanese as a second language classroom, learners use corrective feedback not just for uptake, and they frequently respond to correction through private speech rather than overt uptake.

IX. IMPLICIT/EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE AND PRIVATE SPEECH

Bialystok (1982, cited in Ellis, 2005) provides evidence in support of the fact that the use of implicit and explicit knowledge varies according to the specific tasks that language learners are required to conduct. She distinguishes task demand in terms of analysis and control. From a different perspective, in accordance with sociocultural theory, explicit knowledge can be viewed as a tool that language learners apply so as to achieve control in demanding situations (Ellis, 2005). Explicit knowledge, according to Ellis (2005), manifests itself in the private speech that language learners use in order to grapple with a communicative or linguistic problem. When asked to conduct a think-aloud task, language learners typically access declarative information to help them (Ellis, 1991, cited in Ellis, 2005).

X. FINAL REMARKS

As Diaz (1992, cited in Ahmed, 1994) states, private speech is typically the speech addressed to the self (not others as in social speech) for the purpose of self-regulation (rather than communication). He maintains that social speech aimed to regulate other individuals develops into inner speech which is used to mental and physical behaviors. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argue that by means of inner speech, individuals exercise control over elementary brain. They assert that the roots of current discussions running around private speech lie in the works of Piaget and Vygotsky, the developmental psychologists who were interested in the origins and process of cognitive development. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), it is argued by Vygotsky that inner speech is the final phase in the development of higher forms of human conscious activity. The first phase is egocentric in which the formal appearance of inner speech is social but it functions psychologically. Egocentric speech is reported to be the ontogenetic phase where children, or language learners, develop the ability to use social speech to regulate their own mental activity.

In addition to L1 learners, private speech is also utilized by L2 learners. De Guerrero (1999), on the basis of the results of a number of studies concluded that inner speech was a prevailing phenomenon among all L2 learners. She also claimed that inner speech, or mental rehearsal of L2, increased in conjunction with the increase in the learners' level of proficiency, which is compatible with what Vygotsky (1986) hypothesized about the developmental nature of inner speech.

In the same vein, Lantolf (2002) contends that private speech has been well attested among L2 speakers in its planning, attending, and thinking functions.

Vygotsky (1986) purports that that inner speech cannot be an interior aspect of external speech, but a function in itself and it still remains speech, i.e. thought connected to words. But, as stated by Vygotsky (1986), while in external speech thought is embodied in words, in inner speech words die as they call forth thought. In fact inner speech takes the form of thought through which mental and physical activity is controlled, and the flow of thought is not accompanied by simultaneous unfolding of speech in linguistic form (Vygotsky, 1986). It is also stated by Mitchell and Myles that when using private speech, children and adults talk for themselves, rather than for an external conversational partner.

Private speech can be a source of comprehensive study for researchers and practitioners in the field of English language teaching. By hearing the word language proficiency, one might think of mastering the speaking ability first. As to the development of speaking ability, private speech is therefore of crucial importance for those who want to investigate the possible effects of this self-talk on the process of L1 development and its relevance with foreign/ second language learning. Overall, private speech is what apparently used by all language learners. It can be considered as a technique or a strategy. Thus, any strategy or technique which is partly capable of improving the learners' language proficiency should be taken into account to be investigated. Hence, it is suggested that some studies be conducted to find out the effect or relationship of private speech on and with different language skills or sub-skills in Iranian contexts at English language institutes.

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Morteza Montazeri has been teaching English for about 8 years at different institutes. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL, 3rd year, at Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran. He has been an active participant of national ELT conferences and has published some research articles in international journals. His areas of interest include Curriculum Development, CALL and Teacher Education.



Hadi Hamidi has been teaching English for about 10 years at different institutes. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL, 4th year, at Islamic Azad University, Science and Research branch, Tehran, Iran. He has carried out a number of researches, translated a couple of articles, and presented a number of papers in different conferences and seminars inside the country. His areas of interest include Research Statistics, Classroom Management and Language Assessment.



Bahman Hamidi has been teaching English for about 5 years at different institutes. He has his M.A. in TEFL from Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon branch, Iran.