

---

Title	My inner voice is telling me: Students' inner voice as metacognition about language learning
Author(s)	Lawrence Zhang Jun
Source	<i>REACT</i> , 2001(1), 13-20
Published by	National Institute of Education (Singapore)

---

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

# MY INNER VOICE IS TELLING ME: STUDENTS' INNER VOICE AS METACOGNITION ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING

**Review by Lawrence Jun Zhang**

## INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of educators and teaching practitioners in applied linguistics have realised the important part students themselves play in language learning. In fact, the role that students play as individuals is, in most cases, more crucial than other external factors, such as the learning environment. Research suggests that learner awareness, or metacognition, is necessary for successful learning. Flavell (1987) defines metacognition as "knowledge and cognition about cognitive objects". He broadens this to include "anything psychological" (p.21).

A key component of metacognition is *inner voice*. Together with metacognition, the notion of inner voice can help teachers better understand and identify students' learning processes and difficulties (Nunan, 1996; Williams & Burden, 1999; Tomlinson, 2000). Such difficulties stem from, among other things, their expectations, the worries and anxieties caused by their strong ambition to succeed, the challenge brought into the learning process by their own anguish, and frustrations due to their perceptions of the language learning process and the imbalance between the amount of time spent and limited success achieved

(Zhang, 2000b, 2000c). These can all be reflected through students' inner voice (Tomlinson, 2000).

Understanding inner voice can also help teachers learn how students mentally interact with their peers and with the physical world around them as they grow with the language (Vygotsky, 1986). The concept is particularly relevant to our understanding of English teaching in the Singapore context, given the close relationship English language has with students' future career advancement.

This article reviews some of the research into the role of students' inner voice in language learning and suggests some implications for classroom practice.

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

### ***What do we mean by inner voice?***

In the literature, the terms "inner voice" and "private speech" are used interchangeably. McCafferty (1994a, 1994b, 1998) and Lantolf (2000) use "private speech" for what is elsewhere referred to as "inner voice" (e.g., Tomlinson, 2000). Private speech,

according to Lantolf (2000), is a form of language play through which learners synthesise new input and “in doing so put things back into equilibrium”. The key to this internalisation, he claims, is communicative activity, of the social as well as the private kind. Thus, he says, second language learning goes on not just *inside* our heads, as input-processing approaches maintain, but *outside* of our heads as well, in the verbalisation known as private speech.

Tomlinson (2000) describes how inner voice functions in language learning as follows:

1. We use our inner voice when we produce speech sounds in the mind. We use it whenever we talk to ourselves, whenever we want to develop our responses and thoughts, and whenever we need to make decisions or plans.
2. The inner voice is also the voice that is used to achieve the articulatory loop, a means of making speech sounds in the head to aid the processing of language seen or listened to. This loop can be said to consist of two components, a “passive input phonological store” and “an active articulatory rehearsal process”.
3. This articulatory loop is used to mentally echo some of the words we hear when listening and most of the words we see when reading. It does this so that we can personalise with other people’s words, so that we can give our own intonational impact on salient utterances, so that we can trigger off sensory and affective associations, and so that we can retain the words longer in our temporary store (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 124).

Williams and Burden (1999), found evidence for students’ use of inner voice in learning. Through interviews, they investigated the way in which students conceptualised the notion of “doing well”, together with their perceived reasons for their successes and failures, all of which reflected the students’ own conceptions of themselves as learners. They found that most students tended to judge their success by external factors such as teacher’s approval, marks or grades. However, their explanations also revealed the use of inner voice, which suggest that students’ own metacognitive awareness of the positive and negative factors involved in their learning a second language could help them articulate worries and anxieties related to their expectations, and thus free them to set clearer learning goals.

### ***Why is inner voice important?***

The concept of inner voice, when coupled with a recent three-stage model of language processing advanced by John R. Anderson (2000), can throw light on the problems of production and fluency in second language learning and use. In Anderson’s theory, language processing and production entails three stages - perceptual processing, parsing and utilization. In perceptual processing, portions of new text are retained in Short Term Memory (STM) to be processed for meaning. The second stage, parsing, is where meaning-based representations of new information are constructed. In the final stage, utilization, the learner relates a mental representation of text to declarative information already stored in Long Term Memory (LTM).

This model helps us appreciate that when students process language, they have to mentally, and sometimes vocally, “prepare” the language data prior to production for the listening “audience”. The same is true before they read aloud or listen in the L2 when an audience is present.

### ***Are L1 and L2 inner voices the same?***

Tomlinson (2000) claims that inner voices in L1 and L2 are substantially different. The inner voice in L1, he maintains, is characteristically elliptical, vague, implicit, and incomplete although coherent. In L2 its vocabulary range and syntactic structures are restricted and narrow and it relies heavily on nonverbal features such as intonation and stress. As in L1 inner voice, grammar and lexis are similar to speech heard in intimate,

colloquial, unplanned discourse (see Carter & McCarthy, 1995, for these terms). Inner voice vocalizations can be meaningless if heard out of context, but they are meaningful for the learners themselves, expressing as they do the learners’ “relationship with their own being”. Expressions like “say what?”, “so how?”, “go nowhere”, “what to do?”, and “did or what?” are typical Singaporean examples of what it might mean to show one’s inner voice when faced with a difficult situation in language learning.

Tomlinson (2000, pp. 133-142) lists 12 main functions of inner voice in language learning, and for the sake of completeness and clarity, they are listed below, so that the basic tenets of the concept can be captured (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Functions of Learners’ Inner Voice in Language Learning**

<b>Functions of the Inner Voice</b>	<b>Specific Forms of Expression</b>
1. Repeating	Repeating utterances that are being listened to or being read
2. Mental Representation	Setting up connections between what is being processed and what is already known by the learner through use of visualisation, inner speech, and affective responses
3. Connecting	Making connections through sensory images and the inner voice to establish some kind of relationships between speech segments or sentences
4. Responding	Expressing views on what students are reading, listening, or experiencing
5. Remembering	Storing in memory personal mental representation of the experiences
6. Recalling	Talking to oneself to spark and supplement sensory images which can bring back students’ representations of what they are trying to recall

7. Developing thought	Cultivating a habit of developing thought through the inner voice
8. Planning	Using visual imagery to project what is to be learned through the inner speech
9. Deciding	Making decisions through the inner voice
10. Reassuring	Relieving oneself of the troubles, anxieties, talking of some potentially positive future event, making excuses, mumbling expressions of support
11. Preparing for public speech	Paving the way for presenting oneself before an audience
12. Monitoring	Checking one's speech production for accuracy, appropriateness, and effect

Source: Based on Tomlinson, 2000, pp.135-145.

Tomlinson's research has shown that while inner voice in L1 performs many functions, L2 learners' use of inner voice is comparatively inhibited. This could be because most language learning activities are organised around encouraging, urging, or even coercing students to speak up what they have just learnt (Frawley and Lantolf, 1985; McCafferty, 1994b). The pressure to perform in classroom contexts can obviously affect students' confidence, and under these circumstances errors in speech are more likely to occur. In fact, the main reason for an increase in speech errors might be the learners' high degree of nervousness in expressing themselves, and that this prevents them from using their inner voice in the normal way.

Another illustration of how L1 and L2 inner voices differ is reported by McCafferty (1994b). In an experiment in which an adult native speaker and a low-intermediate participant were asked to narrate a series of six pictures, the L1 learner and the L2 learner demonstrated their reaction to the pictures in different ways. The L2 learner used private speech to label the components of each frame

and signal knowledge of the task; while the native speaker presented a coherent and cohesive narrative account, focussing on events rather than objects (see examples a & b below, taken from McCafferty, 1994b, p. 426).

- a) *Monkeys are playing in the tree.*  
(L2 learner)
- b) *He tries to get the monkeys to give him back his bats.* (L1 learner)

These differences suggest that L2 learners and L1 learners might emphasise different aspects in a speech event because of their different mental representations of the event (e.g. identification and description vs. cause/effect reasoning).

The differences are interesting, particularly in connection with what Frawley and Lantolf (1985) have reported that many L2 "errors" may reflect the speaker's mental orientation rather than his/her failure to use the L2 correctly; and this finding also coincides with McCafferty's (1994a) results, which indicate that ESL learners' use of private speech or inner voice might actually be

regulated by their level of proficiency. Higher proficiency levels in the language, it seems, enable students to speak their minds, thus facilitating progress. In contrast, low language proficiency is an inhibiting factor. We should remember, though, that other affective factors like students' anxiety, reservations, and such, probably need also to be taken into account.

## DISCUSSION

If, as the above review suggests, students' inner voice in L1 and their inner voice in L2 are different, and that inner voice function is linked with higher language proficiency, it would seem that L1 students are advantaged, having more chances and alternatives to release their anxiety in language production. By contrast, in L2 students are constrained both linguistically and by the classroom context. Consequently, they are not as free as their L1 counterparts to express their own private voice in the target language.

L2 learners' inability to use the target language further restricts their ability to formulate and rehearse utterances mentally before they really resort to the target language to realise their communication goals. It seems clear that L2 learners are doubly disadvantaged. For this reason we need, as teachers, to make conscious attempts to help students develop their own ways of expressing their thoughts internally. More training and encouragement are crucial in this respect.

Paradoxically, common classroom practice seems directly to discourage this. The tendency is for teachers to check

students' language use by monitoring, or even overcorrecting their speech errors while students are performing a task in the classroom. No doubt teachers see correction as an important part of instruction, but the point needs to be clarified *When can teachers give students freedom to develop an inner voice so that they can express their own private voice during classroom activities?* Given the principle that form-focussed instructional (FFI) activities should be centred around themes and meaning in language teaching, where does the idea of developing inner voice fit in?

Obviously "meaning" has to be the paramount concern in language production, yet "form" should not be neglected. (See Zhang, 2000a, for a review). Teachers will need to help their students develop inner voice. Perhaps the solution is to conflate both approaches and encourage students' inner voice development through a two-stage process in classroom procedures. The first stage can be focused primarily on developing inner voice, and the second stage on both meaning and form.

I believe that a two-stage process will also encourage learners to become more metacognitively aware of their potential and limitations as language learners and users. The point is this: teacher intervention aimed at helping students monitor their own production can only be relevant and meaningful when students are beginning to develop their inner voice, or have developed one. In other words, *delayed correction is better than on-the-spot correction in L2 students' language production activities.*

Activities for developing students' inner voice could be made a priority, for example, when students are preparing themselves for public speech presentations. Similar activities can be introduced in relation to specific reading or listening tasks, so that students can vent their anxiety in the process of learning and using the language.

## CONCLUSION

As teachers, we need to pay close attention to students' inner voice in the classroom. If we can become more aware of the role of the "inner voice" in our students' language learning processes, we will be in a better position to discover their learning problems, and these can serve as guides for designing remedial action (Nunan, 1996). Moreover, it is now well accepted that teaching is a collaborative activity. If students can be made metacognitively aware of their own priorities in language learning, and their own potentials and weaknesses as language learners, language learning and teaching will more successful (Schmidt, 1993). Finally, if teachers are to play a part in the Ministry of Education's new ability-driven education programme in Singapore schools, they will need to understand how their students perceive their own language learning experiences.

An understanding of students' inner voice is essential if teachers are to help their students achieve their potential as learners and grow with the language they are learning.

## SOURCES

Anderson, J. R. (2000). *Cognitive psychology and its implications* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Worth Publishing.

Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (1995). Grammar and the spoken language. *Applied Linguistics*, 16(2), 141-158.

Chang, A. S., Gopinathan, S., & Ho, W. K. (1999). *Growing up in Singapore: Research perspectives on adolescents*. Singapore: Prentice Hall.

Flavell, J. H. (1987). Speculations about the nature and development of metacognition. In F. E. Weinert & R. H. Kluwe (Eds.), *Metacognition, motivation and understanding* (pp. 21-29). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Frawley, W., & Lantolf, J. P. (1985). Second language discourse: A Vygotskian perspective. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(1), 19-44.

Lantolf, J. P. (2000). *Going out of my head! Private speech and SLA*. Keynote address presented at Language in the Mind Conference, National University of Singapore, 3-8 September, 2000.

McCafferty, S. G. (1994a). The use of private speech by adult ESL learners at different levels of proficiency. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp. 117-134). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

McCafferty, S. G. (1994b). Adult second language learners' use of private speech: A review of studies. *Modern Language Journal*, 78(4), 412-426.

- McCafferty, S. G. (1998). Nonverbal expression and L2 private speech. *Applied Linguistics*, 19(1), 73-96.
- Nunan, D. (1996). Hidden voices: Insiders' perspectives on classroom interaction. In K. M. Bailey & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the language classroom* (pp. 41-56). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, R. (1993). Awareness and second language acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 13, 206-226.
- Tomlinson, B. (2000). Talking to yourself: The role of the inner voice in language learning. *Applied Language Learning*, 11(2), 123-154.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. (1999). Students' developing conceptions of themselves as learners. *Modern Language Journal*, 83(2), 193-201.
- Zhang, L. J. (2000a). Shoot the white elephant with a cannon? Form-focussed instruction in second language acquisition. *Review of Educational Research and Advances for Classroom Teachers*, 19(2), 1-8.
- Zhang, L. J. (2000b). Metacognition in L2 reading literacy acquisition. In A. Brown (Ed.), *English in Southeast Asia '99: Developing multiliteracies* (pp. 83-96). Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
- Zhang, L. J. (2000c). Uncovering Chinese ESL students' reading anxiety in a study-abroad context. *Asia Pacific Journal of Language in Education*, 3(2), 31-56.

# **INNER VOICE**

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING**

### ***1. Expand students' metacognitive awareness of the role of the inner voice in language learning by:***

- asking them to talk about the target language in a language they prefer using;
- teaching special techniques to use the inner speech, e.g., murmuring what is going to be said, speaking up about one's anxiety when faced with a language production task;
- encouraging them to use the inner speech before and after communication activities in the classroom.

### ***2. Help students to reduce anxiety and develop their own inner voice by:***

- using simple and colloquial language in the L2 classroom;
- using plain but correct and proper language in giving instructions to students when organising language learning/production activities in the classroom;
- building up students' confidence through teacher-support and peer-evaluation so that they have more courage to face the difficulties in learning the language.

### ***3. Help students develop their communicative competence in language production activities by:***

- using various texts, preferably texts which are thought-provoking so that students can be exposed to varieties of language and realistically understand how language works in its real form;
- permitting certain degrees of L1 use in the L2 classroom so that students can project themselves as intelligent, creative thinkers, instead of being restricted by their low L2 proficiency in the expression of ideas, thoughts and opinions;
- trying to link students' L1 inner voice to their L2 inner voice by accepting some L1 use in their reflections on their L2 learning to reduce fear of using L2 to communicate their thoughts;
- designing classroom activities that are aimed at developing students' thinking skills in the target language.

### ***4. Stretch students a little bit further by cultivating their inner voice in various ECA/CCA activities through:***

- incorporating inner voice development in both L1 and L2 Speech and Drama activities and other CCA activities preceded by teacher-scaffolding;
- training students on the spot during ECA/CCA activities to develop their own inner voice through introspective reflection on what they are strong and weak in.