Self-talk or Private Speech in Early Childhood Education: Complexities and Challenges

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Abstract

Private speech in young children has been investigated by a number of researchers building on the research of Vygotsky. Studies have shown how private speech plays a role in supporting young children's learning. Learning may be supported through private speech or 'self-talk as the child clarifies his or her steps, affirms decisions, articulates an experience or identifies the need for assistance.

Introduction

A pilot study on private speech of young children has made a start at examining private speech in a New Zealand Aotearoa, English-dominant, multicultural kindergarten. Sensitivity to and awareness of the context of the child's self-talk may be used to guide the teacher's response to the child's learning. In a city like Auckland it is not uncommon for diverse languages to be spoken by children and families in a centre. The role of private speech then presents a different challenge. The question is posed as to how children from diverse language backgrounds use private speech in an English environment. Alternatively, as is suggested by Vygotsky's research, do children in these circumstances not express their private thoughts as they are aware that their speech will not be understood?

Background

The phenomenon of children talking to themselves as they play, rather than to a particular person, is an interesting feature of their language and cognitive development. The label given to this type of speech is 'private speech' but it may also be referred to as *'self-talk'*. My preference is 'self-talk' as, once thoughts are voiced and therefore may be heard, private speech can become the catalyst for social talk. I will use the labels interchangeably in this report.

In early childhood education, a realisation that children's private speech or self-talk is instrumental in their learning may alter the teacher's perceptions of this aspect of children's development. Teachers who recognise that children use self-talk as an important part of their development are more likely to notice it, recognise the context and be sensitive to the child's needs and the context of the self-talk.

This poses further questions. What role does the environment play in altering the child's response to the language context? Is it possible that an early childhood

philosophy that supports each child's sense of self from a socio-cultural perspective can override the language issues? Are the effects of different languages and lack of verbal understanding overridden by the strength of the relationships and consistent attempts at communication in whatever form? The degree of wellbeing and belonging which the children experience within the early childhood environment may (or may not) influence the amount of private speech that they use. These are questions yet to be answered. Language diversity is a reality in countries like New Zealand, Australia and the United States that have immigrants from diverse countries globally. Issues of equity and beliefs and values are addressed in this country through the Code of Ethics (Ministry of Education, 1995) and through *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and Quality in Action (Ministry of Education, 1998). It is my contention that if there is a match between the centre's (which includes the teachers) ethos and that of the family, then there will be a greater sense of belonging for the families and children. If there is incongruence between the centre's ethos and that of the family, the families are less likely to feel a sense of belonging and this will have an effect on the children's experience. In a world where all things are equal, children would attend centres where their language is spoken. For a number of reasons, including the dominance of English (with at least some Te Reo Maori), and the daunting number of minority languages spoken by immigrant families particularly in Auckland, this is not possible.

The literature

It has been noted by researchers, beginning with Piaget and Vygotsky, that children talk to themselves. Piaget referred to egocentric speech as speech about the child's self which is not directed at anyone in particular, although it seems that the presence of someone serves as a stimulus for the speech (Piaget,1926). Whilst this has a noted social component, it is minimal, according to Piaget (Piaget,1926). He described 'socialised speech' as having a different function. It is purposefully directed at someone so that the 'child really exchanges his thoughts with others, either by telling his hearer something that will interest him and influence his actions, or by an actual interchange of ideas by argument or even by collaboration in pursuit of a common aim' (Piaget, 1926 p. 10). Piaget's research on these aspects of children's speech was challenged by Vygotsky and his colleagues. Vygotsky did not agree with Piaget's identification of this speech as egocentric. Further, he did not agree with Piaget's theory that 'emphasises that it [egocentric speech] does not fulfil any realistically useful function in the child's behaviour and that it simply atrophies as the child approaches school age' (Vygotsky, 1962, p.16). Vygotsky concluded from his experiments that egocentric speech had a greater function in children's language and thought, "Not only is it a means of expression and a release of tension, it also functions to direct the child's thought and aid in planning the solution of a problem" (Vygotsky, 1962, p.16).

Vygotsky's observation that: 'Prior to mastering his own behavior, the child begins to master his surroundings with the help of speech.' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.25) is particularly relevant in terms of early childhood education. Thus, the child, with the aid of speech, begins to manage his or her environment. In contrast to Piaget's view that egocentric speech is based on the child's focus on self, Vygotsky proposed that private speech has a more significant function in that children use speech to guide their behaviour to help them to find a solution (Vygotsky, 1978).

Accepting Vygotsky's conclusion, it seems that private speech plays a significant role in the child's strategies to make sense of the world. This raises the question of whether children who find themselves in foreign language environments feel comfortable enough in this environment to engage in private speech in their own language. A significant development in Vygotsky's research was the finding that children who realised that the people present could not understand them reduced the amount of private speech that they used. His research showed that when children were placed in foreign language environments 'their private speech dropped to none in some cases and in others to one-eighth of the private speech used in a non-foreign language environment' (Vygotsky, 1978 p.233).

Private speech in early childhood has been researched fairly extensively over the past twenty five years (Diaz & Lowe, 1987; Diaz, Padilla &Weathersby, 1991; Berk & Winsler, 1995; Berk & Spuhl, 1995; Winsler, Diaz & Montero, 1997; Krafft & Berk, 1998; Montero & Huertas, 1999; Bailey & Brookes, 2003). Krafft & Berk (1998) investigated the influence of the environment on the amount of private speech used by preschoolers in two different early childhood environments with differing philosophies and found these different environments to have an influence on the amount of private speech that the children used. Their research into a Montessori preschool and a traditional preschool found that 'opportunities for open-ended pursuits (especially make-believe) and reduced teacher direction fostered children's self-directed speech (Krafft & Berk, 1998).

The environments, the attitudes of the teachers, the resources available, the messages which these children are given, both overt and covert, about the acceptance of their culture and language, may contribute to their sense of comfort within the environment. The attitude of the teachers, as well as the community of peers and other adults, are also contributing factors to the environment. These issues are fundamental to the fostering of conditions conducive for all children in early childhood centres. For children who are vulnerable in terms of their newness and strangeness to the language environment, attitudes and other factors take on no less, and possibly more, relevance. If self-talk aids children in solving problems, then this strategy is an important one for children who find themselves in a place that offers so many learning challenges.

There are challenges for teachers and children in communicating and working within these differences. The emphasis on responsive and reciprocal relationships as referred to in *Te Whariki* is a fundamental principle which underpins practice and works within the constraints of difference (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The significance and implications of private speech

Research by a number of researchers has documented the role of private speech in children's learning. Padilla & Weathersby, 1991; Berk & Winsler, 1995; Winsler, Diaz & Montero, 1997; Montero & Huertas, 1999; Gillen, 2000; Bailey & Brookes, 2003). There is a progression in the development of private speech and children's use of private speech or self-talk diminishes and becomes internalised at around the age of eight. (Bailey & Brookes, 2003). Until then, children use self-talk to regulate their behaviour by, and to assist in, doing tasks. Bailey & Brookes (2003) refer to the use of private speech in the 'event/reaction pause' (the 'thought' pause which allows the individual to reflect before moving on) as contributing to the child's strategies to manage his or her behaviour.

Krafft and Berk (1998) categorized the private speech which early childhood teachers may recognise as follows:

> (1*) Affect expression*: an expression of emotion which is directed at no-one in particular such as 'wow' when looking at a new toy.
>
> (2) *Word play and repetition*: such as the repetition of words and sounds for their own sake.
>
> (3) *Fantasy play speech*: Role-play verbalisations that take the self or an object such as a toy or a puppet as a social partner.
>
> *(4) Describing one's own activity and self-guidance*: This includes remarks by the child about his or her own activity directed to no one in particular. This category includes descriptions of what the child is doing as he or she is doing it and thinking out loud. An example of this is: P, sitting on the mat, says to himself, "I want to cut this out. I need scissors" (Krafft & Berk, 1998 p. 646, 647).

These categories may be used to assist teachers to recognise self-talk and therefore to use this self-talk as an assessment tool in furthering understanding of the child's thinking and learning. In working with children from different language backgrounds, these categories may be useful for teachers in identifying when the child is using private speech and to document in what context this speech is used.

The pilot study

I observed four children with a Pacific Island language as their first language. The children were four years old, and attended an English language kindergarten. I used a combination of video recording and observations but found the video camera to be obtrusive and a distraction to the children. The most successful research method proved to be careful and unobtrusive documentation of observations. In my observations, I wrote down what the child said and the context in which he/she said it. I limited myself to noting private speech or self-talk, but I included accounts of other language involved in that context. Later, I categorised the self-talk according to Krafft and Berk's (1998) categories.

I found that English was the language used in the children's private speech. Although the children were all from different language backgrounds, all obviously knew enough English to express themselves in English in both private speech and socialised speech. I observed examples of the different categories used in Krafft & Berk's research (1998).

(1*) Affect expression*

> 'Tana's' expression of success at completing a puzzle, "I did it!".
>
> 'Lilian's' expression of, "I can do this" when she completed a puzzle.
>
> 'Tana's' "Cool! Cool!" as he played with water.

(2) *Descriptive and self-guidance*

> 'Jimi 's' announcement that he had finished his morning tea, "I'm finished!" He was fairly new at the kindergarten and seemed to be announcing this to no one as he was alone at the table at the time, but this announcement seemed to mean that he felt entitled to leave the table, which he did.
>
> 'Tana's,' "I've got 1, 2, 3, 4, 5," counting the yellow toys that he had collected in the sandpit.
>
> 'Tana's', "Wooo – wet and wet" as he poured water in the water wheel.
>
> 'Elizabeth's' song," I'm making castle".
>
> 'Tana's, "I know where this goes," as he placed his puzzle piece.

(3) Fantasy play

> 'Lilian' talking to the doll that she was feeding, "Yummy, huh?".
>
> 'Lilian' saying, "Ready! Muffins!" as she took the empty tray out of the family corner oven.

(4) Word play

> 'Tana's' singing to himself as he played with water, repeating the same sounds, "yeh yeh yeh yeh, dah dah dah dah" to a made-up melody.

I observed several occasions in this pilot study when the private speech became a trigger for social interaction. For example, the child singing at the water trough, was joined by another child singing the same melody and imitating the word sounds. A short while later a third child joined in, so that the three of them were singing enthusiastically together. This was a made-up song and the two who joined in were imitating the sounds convincingly. Thus, in this incident, self-talk in the form of singing to oneself merged into a shared social experience.

The incidence of private speech is acknowledged in research and to some extent in the day to day experiences of children in early childhood centres. Using observation of private speech as a tool in understanding the child's thoughts, is, I believe, under-utilised in early childhood education. It has potential for alerting adults to the level of scaffolding required to work collaboratively with the child in moving to the zone of proximal development (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Perhaps children and adults do use self-talk unconsciously to know when to scaffold or assist. Winsler, Diaz and Montero (1997) stated that the fact that children were more likely to be successful after scaffolding if they used private speech suggests that there are complexities in response by both child and teacher If teachers are unaware of the significance of the child's self-talk to scaffolding and the relationship of this to their learning, then their responses may not show the sensitivity required to successfully support the children's learning and development.

Recognition of self-talk has further potential in assessing the child's sense of wellbeing. Affective expressions can illustrate how the child is feeling in relation to an incident or object. In a language environment where the child is not able to understand the language or languages spoken and is further not able to be understood, the presence of self-talk may in itself be an indicator that the child has a sense of belonging. This will be further investigated as part of my research.

Whilst teachers (and peers) may already be responding to a child's self-talk, research has yet to study how this is being experienced. Some further possibilities for research include self-talk and the experience of children in foreign language

environments, self-talk as an indicator of wellbeing and self-talk as an initiator of social interaction. The evidence of self-talk, and the context of that self-talk, has the potential to open up the thinking world of the child to the adults in his or her life. Sensitivity to and awareness of this self-talk can offer potential to the adults who wish to support the child's learning and experience. It may provide opportunities to both respect this private world and then, when the moment changes from self-talk to a focus on an 'other', for the adult to approach with a better knowledge and understanding of the child's inner world.

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About the author

I was born on the East Coast of South Africa. In 1997, I immigrated to New Zealand and took up a position as a kindergarten teacher. In between teaching and raising my children, it seems that I have been studying. My first qualification was a Diploma in Teaching (pre-primary) then a Higher Diploma (primary school), a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Education and the Master of Education with which I graduated just before leaving for New Zealand. I am currently studying for the Ed.D at the University of Auckland. My research centres on the complex issue of language and languages, including the private speech of children. I am a lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology, the mother of two adult children and a very besotted grandmother.