

The Nature of Speech and Internal Thinking

Jo-An Vargo

As visitors move from preschool classrooms through the early primary grades, they occasionally remark about the amount of conversation occurring in the classrooms. There is a healthy buzz of students and teachers interacting with learning materials and each other. At other times, we observe a high degree of excitement and discovery. Then, as our young students become eight years old or so, the sounds in our classes are “toned down” to a lower frequency and volume. There are times when I walk into the third grade and wonder, “Where are the children?” Lo and behold, they’re all in the classrooms and working silently! What has happened during these six years of learning?

We, as teachers, respect the developmental level of each child. When children are young, they use what psychologist Lev Vygotsky called *private speech* (thinking aloud) when they work on tasks that appropriately challenge them. They use private speech more in this circumstance than they do on easy tasks or no task at all. The purpose of private speech is not for communication with others; instead it helps children guide their thinking process and actions. As children mature, private speech gradually evolves into internal thought.

When tasks are too difficult for a child, children stop thinking their way through a process toward completion. Their approach is disorganized. At this point, students frequently lose motivation and disengage from the task. If the task is too easy, a child will possibly complete it but not with adequate attention to detail and accuracy. I’m always impressed by our early childhood teachers’ ability to design learning experiences that support a range of student competencies. They nurture each child’s growing understanding by gently asking questions that help the learner break down a task into manageable stages and verbalize each step. This allows the child to rehearse the problem-solving strategies verbally. Afterward, they are ready to solve the problem alone and talk their way through the process independently.

So how important is it to deliberately design curriculum content that allows our students to work through tasks verbally and then gradually develop their internal thinking? Longitudinal research by Bivens and Berk (1990) tracked students from first through third grade. They focused on mathematical tasks and learned that the gradual internalization of private speech directly correlated with effective on-task behavior. Students who had developed internal thinking worked purposefully, focused their attention, and avoided off-task behaviors. Conversely, students who had not learned how to think through the steps internally were chatting away about irrelevant topics while working. They were not effective problem-solvers, wiggled around in their seats, and fidgeted with the learning materials. In 1992, Berk published the results of additional research. “The more private speech preschoolers and early elementary school children use, the greater their performance gains when assessed from two days to as much as a year after the initial observation.” Our students’ achievement certainly confirms this research, and I hope this explanation clarifies any questions you or our visitors might have.