

COGNITION, PRIVATE SPEECH AND ORAL EXPRESSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIAN LEARNERS OF FRENCH

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of oral proficiency has always been critical to the teaching and learning of foreign/second language all over the world. Meanwhile, recent researches have suggested that cognitive strategies could be helpful in the learners' efforts at acquiring both oral and writing proficiencies in foreign/second languages. After a brief survey of the major theoretical considerations as well as empirical dispositions in the domain of Cognition and private speech as they relate to foreign/second language teaching and learning, we discuss in this article the possible interface between the two concepts as it concerns the learning of oral expression. Essentially, the article views private speech, when employed within the scope of cognitive foreign/second language learning theory, as a veritable and result-oriented strategy to the learning of the oral paradigm of foreign/second languages in general and consequently could impact affectively on the Nigerian learners of French.

INTRODUCTION

There is this old proverb: 'Give a man a fish and he will be fed for only a day, but teach him how to fish and he will be fed all the days of his life'. This proverb seems to support recent orientations in the area of human skills learning and acquisition. This is so because if a man knows what to do in order to acquire a given skill and he keeps doing it, he will eventually become a master of that skill. On the other hand, if another man will have to continuously rely on the information being given to him by a skill teacher, he is unlikely to master such skill at the end of the day. It will not be out of place to claim, therefore, that scenarios such as the one painted above might be at the root of the prevalent theories and practices in the area of skills acquisitions whereby preeminent attention is paid to what learners do than what teachers give. In response to the need to design teaching and learning of skills in a way that favours a learner-centered orientation, theories in Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA) or Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in recent times have centered on two major theoretical headings: cognitive and metacognitive strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). While cognitive science in language acquisition generally concerns itself with the direct processes of language acquisition such as language transfer, communication strategies and practice, metacognition studies the learner's ability to plan, monitor, self-direct and evaluate his or learning process. Foreign language learning being a process of skill acquisition, the pertinent place of consistent cognitive exercises in the target language cannot be overemphasized if a result-oriented learning is to be achieved. The situation whereby a learner is called upon to be in charge of his learning can be likened to the proverbial horse which can only be led to the river but must accept the responsibility of drinking the

water. As Oxford (1990:11) rightly observes, “learning begins with the learner”. This statement can be amplified thus: learning begins with the learner and ends with him. With the advent of cognitive approach to foreign language learning, the language teacher has now become a mere facilitator.

In this article, we have chosen to discuss oral language acquisition within the scope and paradigm of FLA with an attempt to study the interface between cognitive science in FLA and the concept of private speech. We construct private speech here as a cognitive process whereby an adult learner of a given foreign language engages in self-talk in which he or she is both the speaker and the audience in the target language. Most essentially, we shall discuss the implications of this interface for the Nigerian learners of French language. The significance of our discussion is rooted firstly in the fact that the acquisition of proficiency in oral expression by the Nigerian learners of French has always been hampered by inadequate situations and environments for constructive verbal practice in the language and, secondly, in the fact that the concept of private speech, as far as we have observed, has not been sufficiently activated by these learners. For the sake of coherence, the article is divided into three sections: cognitive science and FLA, private speech and the development of oral expression in FLA and finally the implications of the interface for the Nigerian French learners.

COGNITIVE THEORY OF FLA

As an alternative to the Chomskyan mentalist approach to the learning of foreign languages, cognitive theory of language acquisition, which became a theoretical force to reckon with in the early 70s, has been very popular in FLA theory and practice. The

mentalist-cognitive debate has been whether language acquisition has anything to do with general cognition or not. According to Piaget (1967), language and cognition share common characteristics and so, language acquisition must rely on the principles of general and not specific human cognition. Consequently, language learning, just like any other form of learning, can be captured within the scope of cognitive learning theories.

This line of reasoning is what Anderson (1983:1) refers to when he postulates that:

The preconception that is most preeminent in all my theories is the belief I have in the unity of the human cognition, that is to say the belief that major cognitive processes such as memory, language, problem solving mechanisms (...) are the various manifestations of a unique underlying system.

On the contrary, Chomsky (1965) believes that cognition and language are distinct human characteristics and, therefore, should be viewed from different perspectives. To him, whereas it is possible for cognitive theories to account for any other form of learning, they are not applicable to language learning. Chomsky (1968) posits that all normal human beings are born with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which enables them to develop language from an innate set of principles which he called the Universal Grammar (UG). Although the scope of this article does not overtly cover the mentalist-cognitive debate, we would like to agree with Karmiloff-Smith (1992) who posits that though language acquisition at the initial stage may rely on specific and unique theories (as argued by Chomsky), with time it must be captured within general human cognition (piaget's position). We argue, therefore, that the acquisition of a second or a foreign language will rely more on general cognition than on a specific mentalist theory since the learners concerned are mostly adults and not children.

Since the advent of cognitive science, several researches have stressed that learning, generally, is an active, constructive, cumulative, and self-directed process that depends largely on the cognitive activities of the learner (see for example, Shuell 1986 and Sternberg 1996). Also, Bereiter (1990) opines that the advent of cognitive theories of learning and knowledge of how specific learning processes in the learner are carried out through specific instructional variables has necessitated a more viable body of scientific knowledge on how best to capitalize on the active nature of learning and the variety of cognitive resources available to learners. The implication of this is that the learning of a new language will require more than the underlying biological properties which a learner possesses as a human being.

In cognitive theory, the learning or acquisition of a foreign language is seen from a constructivist point of view whereby learning occurs through conscious efforts at problem solving which itself is as a result of consistent actions that are geared towards the accomplishment of learning objectives. To achieve these learning objectives, the process must be learner-centered thereby making the learner responsible for his learning (Little 1991; Hammond and Collins 1991). Using the words of Kolb (1984:46), cognitive approach constructs FLA as “*something the learner does and not what is done to him.*”

Human cognition has been considered to be an underlying system manifesting in different forms which include, essentially, memory, language and problem solving mechanisms (Anderson, 1987; Griggs *et al*, 2002). Language being a cognitive phenomenon, therefore, the process of learning a foreign language must take into account cognitive characteristics. The fundamental notion of cognition whereby every human behavior is channelled towards the accomplishment of a desired objective is evident in

the learning of a foreign language since the decision of an individual to learn a language other than his/her mother tongue is consequent upon a set objective. Consciously or unconsciously, his behavior is conditioned by a set goal that should be actualized at the end of the day.

In the same vein, going by the cognitive principles of FLA, each learner is supposed to acquire two complementary forms of knowledge if serious and result-oriented learning is to take place. They are declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1987). While declarative knowledge consists of the accumulation of information needed for the undertaking of a specific action, procedural knowledge deals with the setting in motion of this action. Central to Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) theory (1993; 2000) is the concept of practice. According to this cognitive theory of learning, practice is the driving force behind any skill acquisition. Through practice, declarative knowledge is transferred to procedural knowledge and this is applicable to a variety of domains including the acquisition of proficiency in a foreign language (see also Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, 1996). The notion of practice in foreign language learning will lead us into the next section of this article where we shall discuss the concept of private speech and its effects on oral language learning.

PRIVATE SPEECH AND THE LEARNING OF ORAL EXPRESSION

Studies in private speech were initially and primarily aimed at the cognitive development among children. It was first theorized by Vigotsky, a contemporary of Piaget. Vygotsky was a developmental psychologist as well as a psycholinguist whose

sociocultural theory describes both private speech and inner speech as aspects of human cognitive activities that play the role of a mediator between language and thought. While inner speech is defined as non-verbalized and internalized speech, private speech refers to verbalized speech-for-the-self as against social speech where there are two or more participants. Ohta (2001:14) defines private speech as “*oral language uttered not for communicative interaction with another, but for dialogue with the self*”. This kind of speech, as described by Diaz, (1992:62) is “*in contrast to social speech, as speech addressed to the self (not to others) for the purpose of self-regulation (rather than communication)*”. From the foregoing, private speech can succinctly be described as a non-communicative but a self-directed speech aimed at knowledge internalization. Among children, it is believed that private speech serves as a mediator between language and other cognitive properties thereby helping them to solve several cognitive problems (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Specifically, Vygotsky(1986 : 31) sees it as “*an instrument of thought in the proper sense ... as it aids the individual in seeking and planning the solution of a problem*”. Although three adult private speech contexts, which are thinking aloud speech, embedded private speech and self-regulatory utterances of second language learners, have been identified in literature (see John-Steiner, 1992), we are only concerned here with the second/foreign language learning context. In the case of SLA/FLA, the primary focus of private speech is the development of oral communication skills in the second/foreign language being learnt.

Private speech as a psycholinguistic construct began to interest FLA and SLA researchers and practitioners in the early 80s and since then its major theoretical and empirical tendencies have been to inquire into its potentiality to serve as a

communicative self-regulatory mechanism for adult learners of second/foreign languages. As reported by McCafferty (1994:422) most research findings suggest that private speech approach to the learning of second/foreign languages facilitates the resolution of difficulties that confront learners in oral communication. According to Lantolf and Frawley (1983), these learners are disadvantaged in as much as they are deprived of the opportunity to self-regulate their communicative performance since they are learning a language which they can only practice in the classroom. Going by the imperativeness of practice in the process of skills acquisition, second/foreign languages need to be learnt in environments that allow for total immersion i.e where learners have unhindered opportunities to use the language in a variety of situations. It is therefore viewed that private speech can be of didactic help where learners are not exposed to total linguistic immersion. This point is what Ohta (2001:12) corroborates when she claims that:

private speech, learners' self-addressed utterances, provides a window into the mental activities of learners. These data reveal learners to be mentally active in attending to and analyzing recast.

The claim expressed here by Ohta is that private speech is a practicable self-regulatory strategy for language learners (especially adult learners of foreign languages) as they intensify efforts at resolving communicative challenges brought about by lack of access to social communicative environments where they can constructively and naturally practice the foreign language.

Having established the role of private speech in the learning of a foreign language or a second language as the case may be, it must be noted at this point that while private speech might be natural or intuitive in children, it is a conscious action when used within the scope of SLA by adult learners. However, it has been discovered that teaching

methodologies that are communicative in nature may propel the use of private speech in adult learners (see Lantolf, 1993). Equally, while the use of private speech may have a long-term effect on the written proficiency among foreign language learners, it is obvious that its primary domain is oral expression since it has to do with speaking and not writing. As foreign language learners engage in private speech, they gain the confidence required to speak the language in public. This point is what Guerro (1994) emphasizes when he opines that L2 learners gain confidence and lose anxiety about speaking the language as a result of the use of inner speech, which by implication result in private speech. Practice, they say, brings about perfection. Therefore it can be theoretically argued that when a foreign language learner engages in constant use of private speech, provided those speeches are not corrected as argued by McCafferty (1994:199), he or she is systematically developing and perfecting proficiency in oral expression. What is the implication of all these on the Nigerian learners of French? This is the question the next section will try to answer.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIAN LEARNERS OF FRENCH

There is a consensus today among stakeholders in teaching theory and practice that most of the learning experiences take place outside the classroom. The implication of this particular consensus is that what the teacher will teach in the class amount to a very small quota compared to the conscious efforts of the learner. The role of the teacher has consequently been reduced to that of an encourager and a facilitator. The teacher encourages the learner to take advantage of learning methods by which learners take full responsibility for their learning. Private speech is one of such learning strategies that put

the learning responsibility solely on the language learner and its use should be encouraged in foreign language learning environments where learners do not have direct access to the use of the foreign language they are learning. The learning of French language in Nigeria falls into this category of learning environments. For a more detailed account of the degrading conditions under which Nigerians learn French, see Okeke (2005).

The advent of French as a school subject in Nigeria dates back as far as before independence. According to Brann (1997), French was first introduced in St. Anne's School, Lagos in 1891. Omolewa (1971) gave a different date of 1859 at CMS Grammar School, Lagos. Meanwhile, the exact date French came into being is not very important to our discussion in this paper, rather what concerns us here is the level of oral expression among Nigerian learners of French and how the use of private speech can positively impact on this level.

Without mincing words, almost every stakeholders that have written on the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria agree that the oral expression competence level of most Nigerian learners of French leaves much to be desired (see for example Opara, 1999; Simire, A.B.,2001; Simire, G.O., 2003; Ajiboye, 2003; Onumajuru, 2003; Odesola, 2005; Okeke, 2005). The consensus is that oral expression occupies the first position in the ladder of difficulties faced by these learners. Many reasons have been pointed out to be behind this deplorable situation. They include lack of intrinsic motivation on the part of the learners themselves, inadequate language laboratories and other learning materials in the schools, inadequate language immersion programmes, lack of qualified teachers, etc. Very significantly, while Simire, A.B. (2001)

discovered in her study that most French learners in Nigeria are unable to speak French as a result of the fear of mistake, Odesola (2005) goes further to assert that this deplorable situation is not the fault of the learners because they are faced with unfavourable socio-linguistic realities. According to him, these learners need to learn their mother tongue, the official language, which is English as well as French, a foreign language they have chosen to learn in addition to the first two. He, therefore, argues that the presence of at least two languages in the language mechanism of the Nigerian learner of French will surely have a negative impact on his efforts to communicate orally in the new language. Although this point may be tenable to some extent, one cannot totally agree that the linguistic interference coming from the mother tongue and English will automatically impair a successful learning of French oral expression by Nigerians. Given the right condition and result-oriented approach, Nigerian learners of French can still acquire considerable competence in oral expression skills. This is true because early Nigerian learners of French were having it good.

From the 60s when the teaching of French officially became a taught subject in the secondary schools and a programme of study in tertiary institutions till early 80s, the teaching and learning of French was outstandingly prestigious in Nigeria (see Okeke, 2005). This was made possible due to various favourable factors such as adequate qualified teachers, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to learn French, adequate immersion programmes notably in France and most importantly the buoyant Nigerian economy. However, by the middle of the 80s, corruption had eaten deep into the national purse and consequently, the teaching and learning of French began to lose its prestige. In fact, it is so bad now that many University graduates of French find it extremely difficult

to speak the language. There is obvious lack of language immersion system through which oral expression can be effectively mastered even with the presence of a Nigerian French Language Village, created in 1991 to serve as a language immersion centre for Nigerian learners of French.

Having narrated the deplorable situation of oral expression among Nigerian learners of French, we would like to state that there is no problem without a solution. This deplorable situation can still be salvaged and this is where the question of private speech comes to play. Since there are currently no signs of a return to the era when the Nigerian government sponsored French students on language immersion programme in France and other francophone countries, we must begin to look inward. If the use of private speech is encouraged among Nigerian learners of French, the confidence needed to speak the language publicly will be gained by them. It has been noted earlier in this article that the use of private speech helps language learners overcome the fear of making mistake when the opportunity arises for them to orally express themselves publicly.

As earlier noted, oral proficiency is a major target of language immersion programmes. This brings us to the need to suggest ways of making the Nigerian French Language Village more result-oriented since that is where the compulsory one-year immersion programme takes place. We observe that adequate immersion does not take place in NFLV and the reason is not far-fetched: the village is situated in Nigeria where French is a foreign language. In Covenant University for example, we send our year three students to *Centre Béninois des Langues Étrangères* (CEBELAE) in Cotonou for three months before the commencement of that of the NFLV. According to the students, their three-month immersion experience in CEBELAE is far more qualitative than that of

NFLV which lasts for seven months. In the light of the fore-going, we would like to suggest that, among other strategies, the use of private speech should be highly encouraged in NFLV. For this to be achieved, students should be punished when they speak any language other than French within the village. We are aware that in CEBELAE, students are made to pay 100 FCFA whenever they speak a sentence in any language other than French. Something like that will force the students to embark on private speech whereby they practice privately what they want to say publicly.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we set out to descriptively look into the impact the use of private speech can have on the learning of oral expression among second/foreign language learners, most especially among the Nigerian learners of French. We debuted by enquiring into the cognitive theories of second/foreign language acquisition. We, thereafter, defined private speech as a cognitive activity capable of helping language learners to autonomously engage in constant oral practice thereby overcoming the fear associated with oral expression among second/foreign language learners. As a result of the lack of adequate language immersion programmes for the Nigerian learners of French, we recommend the use of private speech among these learners especially in the NFLV which has been designated as the immersion centre for Nigerian learners of French language. This will afford them the opportunity to practice French outside the classrooms. We conclude by calling on French teachers to encourage the use of private speech among Nigerian learners of French. This can be done by given students assignments such as this:

“Child abuse in Nigeria and how it can be minimized” Prepare an oral presentation on this topic. Make sure you present it to yourselves in your closet before class presentation next week Tuesday.

By so doing, students are encouraged to engage in private speech.

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