The Science of Self-Talk

What Your Inner Voice Can Do | Level B2 | EnglishBridges.com

Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. When do you talk to yourself, silently or out loud? What kinds of things do you say?
2. What do you usually say to yourself before an important exam, game, or presentation?
3. How might the way people talk to themselves differ by age, culture, or personality?

Reading: The Science of Self-Talk

Tennis players often **mutter** to themselves between points. Some **scold** themselves after a missed shot. Almost everyone does the same thing, usually in silence. Psychologists call it self-talk. It is the running **commentary** in your head that plans, comments, and judges.

Inner speech is more physical than it seems. When people talk silently, brain areas used for speaking aloud become active. Sensitive equipment can **detect** tiny movements in the throat muscles. Young children often **narrate** their play out loud. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky argued that this speech slowly becomes silent. People differ a lot. Some hear words in their head almost all the time, and others hardly ever. Perhaps 5 to 10 percent of people say they have little or no inner voice.

Self-talk can change how well people perform. A large review of sport studies found that the type matters. **Instructional** self-talk, such as "watch the ball", works best for precise skills. Motivational phrases help more with strength and **endurance**. In one British experiment, cyclists practiced motivational phrases for two weeks. They rode about 18 percent longer before **exhaustion**, and the effort felt easier. Two weeks is too short for much change in fitness, so the feeling of effort is what changed.

Wording matters too. In studies led by the psychologist Ethan Kross, people prepared a speech in five minutes. Those who talked to themselves by name or as "you" felt calmer and gave better speeches. This **distanced** self-talk reduced emotional reactions quickly, without extra mental effort. Before a test, people often try to calm down, but a racing heart is hard to slow **on command**. People who told themselves "I am excited" before singing or speaking did better. Fear and excitement feel similar in the body.

Self-talk is not always helpful. Harsh criticism and **rumination** are closely linked to anxiety and depression. Positive statements can also **backfire**. When people with low self-esteem repeated "I am a lovable person", they felt worse. The sentence **clashed** with what they believed. Self-talk

works best when it is **believable** and points to the next action. None of these techniques is magic, and many of the studies are small. A good first step is to choose one short **cue** and notice the words you use after a mistake.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

instructional	**backfire**	**on command**	**narrate**	**cue**	**clashed**	**detect**	**commentary**	**mutter**	**rumination**
scold	**believable**	**endurance**	**exhaustion**						

1. He began to _____ angrily under his breath when the bus was late again.
2. My grandmother used to _____ me for coming home with muddy shoes.
3. The radio _____ described every move of the race.
4. Smoke alarms can _____ even a small amount of smoke.
5. A famous actor agreed to _____ the nature documentary.
6. The company made a short _____ video about setting up the printer.
7. Marathon runners need great _____ to keep running for hours.
8. After three night shifts in a row, she nearly collapsed from _____.
9. Most people cannot fall asleep _____, however hard they try.
10. Endless _____ about a bad exam result will not change your grade.
11. His plan to make his girlfriend jealous began to _____ when she left him.
12. Her bright orange jacket _____ with her pink trousers.
13. The actor's tears were so _____ that the audience started crying too.
14. When the teacher raised her hand, that was the _____ for everyone to stop talking.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. a running	_____	**a.** video
2. mutter	_____	**b.** with your beliefs
3. detect	_____	**c.** excuse
4. an instructional	_____	**d.** under your breath
5. test your	_____	**e.** a change
6. collapse from	_____	**f.** commentary
7. a believable	_____	**g.** exhaustion
8. clash	_____	**h.** endurance

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. The _____ of the film was done by a famous actor. (*narrate*)
2. Early _____ of the problem saved the company a lot of money. (*detect*)
3. After the long hike, we were completely _____. (*exhaustion*)
4. Read the _____ carefully before you start the test. (*instructional*)
5. The football _____ shouted with joy when the goal went in. (*commentary*)
6. I can hardly _____ that the summer is already over. (*believable*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. According to the first paragraph, what three things does self-talk do?
2. What physical evidence suggests that inner speech is a kind of real speech?
3. Where does inner speech come from, according to Lev Vygotsky?
4. What is the difference between instructional and motivational self-talk, and when does each work best?
5. What happened in the cycling experiment, and how does the writer explain the result?
6. How did people who used "I" compare with people who used their own name or "you" before a speech?
7. Why might saying "I am excited" work better than trying to calm down?
8. Why did repeating "I am a lovable person" make some people feel worse?
9. Which of the writer's suggestions would you try first? Explain why.
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The cyclists in the British experiment were professional athletes."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that self-talk techniques are magic."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer begin with tennis players? Is it (a) to show a familiar example of self-talk, (b) to prove that tennis is the hardest sport, or (c) to explain the rules of tennis?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. Most people talk to themselves, usually in silence. **T / F**
2. Inner speech uses completely different brain areas from speaking aloud. **T / F**
3. Everyone hears an inner voice most of the time. **T / F**
4. Motivational phrases help more with strength and endurance. **T / F**
5. The cyclists practiced motivational phrases for six months. **T / F**
6. People who used their own name felt calmer before the speech. **T / F**
7. Distanced self-talk needed a lot of extra mental effort. **T / F**
8. Fear and excitement feel very similar in the body. **T / F**
9. Repeating positive statements always makes people feel better. **T / F**
10. Rumination is closely linked to anxiety and depression. **T / F**

Language Focus: Reflexive Pronouns (myself, yourself, themselves)

Reflexive pronouns: myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves.

Use one when the **object is the same person as the subject**: verb + *-self* (*scold yourself*) or preposition + *-self* (*talk to yourself*).

From the reading:

"Tennis players often mutter to **themselves** between points."

"Some scold **themselves** after a missed shot."

Useful phrases: *talk to yourself*, *enjoy yourself*, *teach yourself*, *help yourself*, *by yourself* (= alone).

Tip: Do not add *-self* after *relax*, *feel*, *concentrate*, or *meet*: *I relaxed* (not *I relaxed myself*). Use *each other* when two people do something to one another: *They helped each other.*

Part A. Sentence starters

Finish each sentence so that it is true for you. Use a reflexive pronoun.

1. When I make a small mistake, I usually tell myself _____
2. Before an exam or presentation, I remind myself _____

3. One thing I taught myself is _____
4. The last time I really enjoyed myself was _____
5. When I am alone, I sometimes talk to myself about _____

Part B. Questions

Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to answer using a reflexive pronoun. *Then ask a partner.*

6. What is something you taught yourself to do?
7. What do you say to yourself when you feel nervous?
8. How do you motivate yourself to study when you are tired?
9. Do you prefer to travel with friends or by yourself? Why?
10. Where did you enjoy yourself most last year?

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. Have you ever seen an athlete talking to themselves during a game? What do you think they were saying?
2. Which language do you use when you talk to yourself? Does it change in different situations?
3. Do you remember talking to yourself out loud as a child? What did you talk about?
4. Is your inner voice usually kind or critical after a small mistake? Give an example if you are comfortable.
5. Would you feel comfortable talking to yourself by name? Why or why not?
6. What short cue could help you with a task you do often, such as studying, cooking, or exercising?
7. Do you think saying "I am excited" would help you before a test or interview? Why or why not?
8. How can a coach, teacher, or parent help someone improve their self-talk?
9. Why do you think it is often easier to give good advice to a friend than to yourself?
10. In your culture, is talking to yourself out loud in public seen as normal, strange, or funny?
11. Why might positive statements help some people but not others?
12. Some people have little or no inner voice. How do you think they plan, remember, or make decisions?
13. Should schools teach students how to talk to themselves? What could such lessons include?
14. Many of the studies in the reading are small. How much should we trust advice based on small studies?

Online Practice

Scan the code or visit **englishbridges.com/lessons/science-of-self-talk** for the full reading, vocabulary activities, the Speed Challenge, typing practice, and AI conversation prompts.