

ABSTRACT

A Playful Context Enhances Bilingual and Monolingual

Preschoolers' Mastery Motivation and Private Speech

by

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Children's private speech (audible self-talk during activity) has been studied primarily as a cognitive tool for thinking, planning and self-regulation. This study investigated whether private speech may also function as a tool for motivation. Vygotskian and self-determination theory suggest that children can develop to become agentic and inspired, or conversely disengaged and alienated, due in large measure to the social conditions of their development. As a result, it is imperative to investigate children's private speech and motivational processes in specific contexts that are central to child development. Given current U.S. preschool expansion, and resurgent debates over the merits of play and play-based pedagogy, this study investigated the relative impact of playful and non-playful contexts on preschoolers' private speech and mastery motivation. Mastery motivation involves children's ongoing attempts to master challenging activities, and its components include performance, persistence, challenge seeking, and independence in problem solving. In addition, approximately half of the study's participants were bilingual. A recent review suggested that the bilinguals may use more developmentally advanced private speech, or utilize a wider variety of private speech functions than monolinguals (Sawyer, 2016). To investigate potential bilingual advantages in private speech, a subgroups analysis compared bilingual and monolingual participants on these private speech qualities.

47 preschool children were randomly assigned to engage in challenging fishing and puzzle activities in one of two conditions (playful or non-playful) that simulated key characteristics of contrasting preschool contexts. The playful condition featured sociodramatic role-play, and emphasized intrinsic motivation and prosocial connection, while the non-playful condition was framed as work production, emphasizing extrinsic rewards and individual performance assessment. Children's private speech, mastery motivation, and the relations between them were compared between and across conditions. Children's private speech was classified as *cognitive*, *metacognitive*, *motivational*, or *partially internalized*, using an analytic scheme synthesized from past research. A new category of *playful private speech* was explored in relation to playful and non-playful conditions, and an emotional valence dimension was also coded in children's motivational private speech.

Across both activities, children in the playful context displayed significantly higher overall levels of mastery motivation. Children in the playful context demonstrated better persistence and performance on the fishing activity, and greater challenge seeking / independence on the puzzle activity than children in the non-playful context. Across activities, children in the playful context used significantly more frequent total private speech, and this tendency was most pronounced during the most challenging parts of each activity. On the fishing activity, children in the playful context used more frequent cognitive and playful private speech, while on the puzzle activity children in the playful context used more cognitive and metacognitive private speech. The various components of mastery motivation were found to relate to different categories of private speech. Across conditions, no differences between bilinguals and monolinguals were found on private speech. However, within the playful condition, bilinguals used more developmentally sophisticated (partially internalized) private

speech, but less diversity of (externalized) private speech functions than monolinguals.

Implications for possible bilingual advantages in private speech are considered. In sum, findings support the use of play and playful pedagogy for promoting bilingual and monolingual preschoolers' motivational development, as well as motivationally beneficial forms of private speech.

Keywords: private speech, mastery motivation, Vygotsky, sociocultural, sociodramatic play, preschool pedagogy, early childhood education, bilingualism, bilingual advantage, cognitive development, verbal mediation hypothesis.