

From the chapter

Hatzigeorgiadis, A., Zourbanos, N., Latinjak, A., & Theodorakis, Y. (submitted). Self-talk. In A. Papaioannou & D. Hackfort: Fundamental concepts in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Publisher: Taylor & Francis

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATION OF SELF-TALK STRATEGIES

The development of effective self-talk plans can be routed on the guidelines stemming from three questions related to the application of self-talk strategies: (a) for what purposes to use self-talk, (b) what sort of self-talk should be used, and (c) how to develop effective self-talk strategies.

For what purposes to use self-talk strategies

The basic goals of self-talk strategies are to facilitate learning and enhance performance. Facilitating learning involves acquiring new skills, correcting mistakes, and improving technique. Enhancing performance, may involve being in a state of readiness, choosing and applying effective tactics, regulating cognition and emotion, handle stressful situations or cope with adverse unexpected events. Furthermore, self-talk can also help developing psychological skills and help athletes performing according to their potential. Towards the attainment of these goals self-talk can be used as an instructional strategy to improve concentration, focusing and directing attention, and give feedback, as a motivational strategy to increase effort, persistence, and commitment, and as a self-regulatory strategy to increase self-belief, self-esteem and self-control.

What sort of self-talk should be used

Different self-talk cues may be more or less suitable for different purposes; The effectiveness of self-talk is based on the activation of appropriate functions. The activation of the different functions does not happen independently from one another. Several functions operate simultaneously to produce the desired results. Nonetheless, some functions are more critical for the specific goal we aim for, and these should be targeted through the use of self-talk.

Instructional self-talk is more suitable for attentional purposes such as focusing attention, improving concentration, and directing attention; whereas motivational self-talk is more suitable for purposes such as increasing confidence, improve readiness, and regulate drive. In addition a number of parameters can be considered for deciding what are the appropriate self-talk cues to use: task characteristics, learning stage and experience, and the setting/circumstances are factors that should be considered in relation to the functions the different self-talk cues may serve; what has been termed as the matching hypothesis.

Matching task motor demands to self-talk type

Instructional and motivational cues may serve different functions. Instructional cues can be more effective in helping athletes to improve concentration, direct attention, and focus on technical aspects of a movement. Motivational cues can be more effective in psyching-up, increasing drive, and maximizing physical effort. Considering that for fine tasks attention can be a more crucial factor for performance, whereas for gross tasks, drive and physical effort can be more crucial, instructional self-talk should work better for fine tasks and motivational should work better for gross tasks.

Matching learning stage with self-talk type

At the early stages of learning, the use of explicit cues in the form of instructional self-talk can improve concentration, and help them identify and shift attention to the task-relevant stimuli, thus facilitating the learning process. At more advanced performance stages athletes may benefit more from motivational cue words that refer to psychological and physical activation, the building of confidence and increasing readiness for performance. Thus, instructional self-talk should be more effective for novel tasks, or tasks at the early stages of learning, whereas motivational self-talk should be more effective for well-learned tasks, or tasks at the automatic stage of performance. Accordingly, *matching athletes' experience with self-talk type*, beginner athletes are more likely to benefit more from instructional cues, whereas more experienced and highly skilled athletes should benefit more from motivational cues. Expert performance can be harmed by the use of self-talk, in particular instructional, causing the ironic effect, mentioned in the opening parts of the section. When a skill is well learned and performed automatically with little effort and without conscious monitoring, instructional self-talk would provide explicit rules that can be detrimental for performance causing *paralysis by analysis*.

Matching the setting to type of self-talk

Finally, *matching the setting to type of self-talk*, motivational self-talk seems more appropriate for the competitive circumstances, whereas instructional self-talk should be mostly used in training. As instructional self-talk can be more effective for learning, correcting mistakes, or improving aspects of performance, it seems more appropriate for the practice phase; in contrast, as motivational self-talk can be more effective for increasing readiness and psyching-up, it seems more appropriate for the performance phase.

How to develop effective self-talk strategies

Regarding the final question, several steps should be considered. Some of the important steps are presented below, along with examples for a swimmer to help the understanding of these steps. To begin with, athletes must identify what they want to achieve with the use of self-talk in a given situation, and organize their action towards the goal (e.g., need to improve (a) reaction time for the start, (b) left arm recovery, and (c) leg input for the finish). Once the athletes' needs are identified, and the specific purposes have been targeted, the matching principles should be considered to select the best possible type of self-talk (e.g., a readiness cue for 'a', an instructional cue for 'b', and a motivational cue for 'c'). Then, a list of cue words that could be tested has to be developed. In regard to the cue words, they have to be brief – either one word or a short phrase – and logically associated to both the task and the central idea of the desired goal (e.g., for 'a', go / explode / time; for 'b', high / elbow / reach; for 'c', power legs / give it all / strong). These cues should be extensively practiced. In training, the cues have to be used systematically (e.g., 'a' for all starting drills; 'b' for the warming-up sets; 'c' for the lactate tolerance sets). Not only is self-talk more effective when trained previously, athletes also perceive the technique as less difficult and more effective after repeated applications. Once, the athletes have practiced with the list of cue words, they should be able to identify those self-talk cues that are most effective for the goal they want to achieve. The cues should be then organized for the development of complete self-talk plans, possibly comprising several combinations of cues to match different situations ('time' for the starting blocks, and 'power legs' off the last two turns). Finally, those plans should be applied and practiced until the application of self-talk is perfected.

When not to use self-talk

One should be careful for making reasonable use, rather than overuse, because it is possible that talking through and overanalysing an action, disrupts and subsequently harms

performance; this is called the ironic effect, or in simpler words *paralysis by analysis*. This could be especially true for instructional self-talk, since instructional cue words often are very similar to explicit rules, which can be detrimental for the performance settings. In particular, the use of instructional self-talk could be potentially harmful when used for a well mastered skill, at the automated stages of performance, in high levels athletes, or in a competitive setting because it may interrupt the flow of performance.

How can we develop effective self-talk (ST) strategies?

ST-IMPACT

- **I**dentify what you want to achieve
- **M**atch self-talk to needs
- **P**practice different cues with consistency
- **A**ssess **A**scertain which cues work best for you
- **C**reate specific self-talk plans
- **T**rain self-talk plans to perfection