

Multifaceted Roles of Self-talk in Performance Enhancement of Athletes

¹Adeyeye, F.M and ²Odin, E.F

Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education

University of Lagos Nigeria

¹mayowaadeyeye@yahoo.com, ¹08033263684, ²ebakofaith@gmail.com, ²08169130932

Abstract

Self-talk in sports is the thought that competitor have in their mind. They can be negative, positive or neutral. It tends to be their translation of what's happening around them or their emotions at the moment. Self-talk can be based on perceptions or an opinion heard from others. Depending on its observation, self-talk can influence a few parts of competitor performance in a positive or negative way. Some of the factors of their performance that can be affected include confidence, motivation, effort, focus and attitude. Competitive sports are very demanding and characterized by remarkable physical and psychological pressures and it has been indicated for many years that psychological factors play an important role in competitive sports and affect performance. For a consistent performance of athletes at training and competition, the use of self-talk has been found to be associated with better athletes' performance and champion athletes need to imbibe the skill as a tool for optimal performance. This paper in turn reviews multifaceted roles of self-talk in performance enhancement of athletes.

Keywords: Athlete, Enhancement, Multifaceted roles, Performance, Self-Talk

Introduction

Self-talk is a vital viewpoint in life results for the most part; as in scholarly accomplishment, professional decisions and in addition games and exercise related conduct. Athletes are continuously expected to perform well under pressure. When perceived pressure is at its highest, defeat in performance may occur if athletes are unable to control their thoughts (Craft, Magyar, Becker, Feltz., 2003). Negative thoughts can lead to cognitive anxiety, an example of which includes uncontrollable and rapid worrying about the upcoming performance (Conroy & Metzler, 2007). The ability of an athlete to control anxiety through various cognitive methods, such as self-talk, may influence their performance level.

Self-talk has been studied from the earliest days of research in experimental psychology. In sport psychology, the cognitive revolution of the 1970s led researchers and practitioners to explore the ways in which self-talk affects performance (Judy, VanRaalte & Andrew, 2017). Self-talk is defined as the expression of a syntactically recognizable internal position in which the sender of the message is also the intended receiver. Accordingly, high-level competitive athletes are faced with various difficulties concerning not only their performance but also their psychological well-being (Lundqvist, 2011). Due to this fact, there are many training programmes in which sport psychologists implement a variety of cognitive-behavioural strategies with the objective of aiding athletes in the development of psychological skills to enhance performance, manage emotions and achieve personal well-being (Ryska, 1998; Vealey, 2007).

Pitt, Wolfson and Moss (2014) reported about negative self-talk on performance in competition, concluding that players used more negative self-talk when losing the competition. The participants were amateur soccer players striving for professional contracts and losing a game meant losing a contract. The fear of failure triggered negative self-talk, bad play ensued and more negative self-talk controlled the minds. This study indicated the importance of regulating negative self-talk, to stay positive to win the competition. To control the negative self-talk, it is essential to know self-talk dialogue in athlete's mind.

Self-talk has also been shown to provide assistance in lowering competition anxiety, which is an underlying factor in cognitive aspects of athletic performance. Findings by Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Mpoupaki and Theodorakis (2009) showed self-talk was useful in not only task performance, but also improving self-confidence and lowering cognitive anxiety in a self-talk training intervention with competitive tennis players. Studies focusing on when motivational and instructional self-talk are used have been helpful in examining how these benefits can be maximized.

Hatzigeorgiadis, Galanis, Zourbanos and Theodorakis (2014) conducted an experimental study to examine the relationship of self-talk and performance in competition. Forty-one (41) young swimmers participated in the study and it was discovered that there was significant increase in performance improvement on experimental group compared to the control group in competition. He concluded that self-talk could be effective in the complex and unexpected competitive environment.

Concept of Self-talk

Multiple definitions of self-talk exist in the literature, creating confusion around the exact meaning. Research suggests self-talk can be characterized by someone talking to themselves during any given period to control thoughts and feelings (Holland, 2003). A concise and clear descriptive definition of self-talk is particularly important because there is a potential for conceptual overlap between self-talk, and other cognitive phenomena such as thought and imagery, and behavioural phenomena such as gestures and non-verbal communication. In the review of self-talk definitions, Hardy (2006) pointed to definitions like “self-talk can be manifested as a word, a thought, a smile, or a frown” (Chroni, 1997) and “anytime you think about something you are in a sense talking to yourself” (Bunker, Williams, & Zinsser, 1993)

In an effort to clarify the definition of self-talk, Van Raalte, Vincent and Brewer (2016) put forth a definition that emphasizes the linguistic features of self-talk, defining the phenomenon as “the syntactically recognizable articulation of an internal position that can be expressed internally or out loud, where the sender of the message is also the intended receiver”. The addition of the term “syntactically recognizable” separates self-talk from verbalizations such as shouts of frustration, self-statements made by gestures, and self-statements made outside of the context of formal language. Defining self-talk as an “articulation of an internal position” anchors the meaning of self-talk statements within the individual and places the origin of self-talk in consciousness and information processing.

Self-talk includes the words and phrases that we say to others and ourselves, internally or externally, which can be either negative or positive. Self-talk can be “spoken in words or unspoken in thoughts” (Helmstetter, 1982). Burnett (1995) defined it as “what people say to themselves with particular emphasis on the words used to express thoughts and beliefs about oneself and the world to oneself”. Self-talk occurs on a daily basis whether we are consciously aware of it or not. Most of us are unaware or unconscious of our thoughts. This is because our thoughts are habitual and are automatically occurring. Our self-talk affects our moods, behaviors and attitudes. Unfortunately, the majority of our self-talk works against us rather than for us.

In 1982, Helmstetter indicated that “as much as seventy-seven percent of everything we think is negative, counterproductive, and works against us”. Twenty years later, Stanulis and Manning (2002) stated that individuals make about 55,000 self-talk utterances each day and that 75% of our daily self-talk works against us. This reveals that our daily self-talk is stagnate and that most of what we say to ourselves continues to be counterproductive. There can be many causes as to why negative self-talk has been more prevalent over the years. Over the years, this norm has caused many negative implications for our society and has created self-traps (Bénabou&Tirole, 2002).

Categorization of Self-talk

A substantial amount of self-talk research has been dedicated to categorizing self-talk. Taxonomies are important in that they facilitate a complex and nuanced understanding of self-talk, which enhances the state of research and applied interventions. Some of the categories of self-talk that have been most widely studied and/or are most promising in the literature are discussed in this section. The taxonomies of self-talk presented are not orthogonal, and any particular self-talk may belong to more than one category and may serve more than one function.

- **Valence**

Valence refers to the emotional tone of a self-talk statement. Researchers have separated self-talk into positive, negative, and neutral self-talk categories (Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera&Petitpas, 1994; 2000). Positive self-talk refers to statements that are encouraging or self-assuring in tone, for instance, “Nice work!” or “Yes!” Motivational self-talk is often considered owned a subcategory of positive self-talk and refers specifically to self-talk phrases aimed at boosting motivation such as “go get 'em!” or “you can do it!” Negative self-talk refers to statements that are discouraging or self-deprecating in tone, for instance, “I’m awful” or “Bad game.” Neutral self-talk has neither negative nor positive tone and may include self-talk statements related to tactics or strategy. Neutral self-talk also includes instructional self-talk, a category commonly seen in the literature that refers to statements such as “slow and steady” or “bend your knees,” which provide guidance or instruction to an athlete.

- **Overtness**

Another approach to categorization of self-talk separates overt self-talk statements that occur out loud and can be seen or heard by others from covert statements that occur internally (Hardy, 2006). Self-talk may also be mouthed but not spoken aloud (Van Raalte et al., 2016). Research aimed at understanding overtness in self-talk in sport settings has not been conducted, perhaps in part due to the challenges associated with measuring covert self-talk. Recent speculation about the power of overt self-talk for influencing the sport context, however, may provide an important avenue for further research in this area (Van Raalte et al., 2016).

- **System 1 and System 2**

Building on research and language from dual-processing theories (Kahneman, 2003; Evans&Stanovich, 2013), Van Raalte, Vincent and Brewer(2016) developed an approach that uses System 1 and System 2 categorizations to categorize self-talk based on features related to information processing. System 1, which involves rapid, autonomous processing, involves intuition, gut feelings, and impressions, and System 2, which is typically slower, involves cognitive effort and relies on working memory. System 1 self-talk occurs in line with System 1 processes. That is the self-talk that reflects gut feelings and impressions such as shout of “hooray!” after a goal is scored or “no!” in the face of an error. System 2 self-talk involves the use of working memory and includes self-talk assigned in experimental self-talk studies, suggested by coaches, and selected by athletes for sport performance enhancement. That is the self-talk that directs attention in a particular way including “bend your knees and follow through” or “you can do it!”

- **Grammatical Form**

Grammatical form is another means of categorizing self-talk statements. Researchers have used this approach to categorization to compare the effects of interrogative statements such as “Will I?” to simple future statements such as “I Will” and have found performance benefits for the interrogative “Will I?” form (Puchalsak-Wasyl, 2014; Senay, Albarracin, & Noguchi, 2010). With regard to pronouns, the use of the collective pronoun “we” as in “we can do it,” relative to the use of the pronoun “I,” has been shown to enhance self-efficacy and performance on a sport task (Son, Jackson, Grove & Feltz., 2011). Similarly, the use of non-first person pronouns such as one's own name enhances the ability to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behavior relative to the use of first person pronouns (Kross, Bruehlman-Senecal, Park, Burson, Dougherty & Shablack, 2014). Non-first person pronouns tend to be used when people actively and autonomously respond to negative situations (Zell, Warriner&Albarracin, 2012). Additional research exploring the effects of self-talk of various grammatical forms in sport settings seems warranted.

- **Assigned and Self-selected Self-talk**

A distinction between assigned/strategic self-talk statements and self-selected/automatic self-talk statements in experimental studies is another approach to categorization (Theodorakis, Hatzigeorgiadis & Zourbanos 2012). Assigned self-talk has been shown to enhance performance in experiments (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Galanis & Theodorakis, 2011). In research settings, knowing which statements are assigned by researchers and which statements come from participants is important for understanding and contextualizing the findings of a study, as assigned self-talk helps ensure the equivalence of self-talk across conditions. When applying the distinction between assigned/strategic self-talk and self-selected/automatic self-talk categories outside of the research environment, however, the distinction becomes less clear. Using just two categories to identify the origin of self-talk appears to be insufficient because athletes may also pick up self-talk from teammates, the Internet, books, observing others being coached, in classes, and as part of and outside of conscious awareness. Some self-talk that athletes use, self-selected/automatic, may later be suggested by coaches or sport psychologists and thus be considered assigned/strategic. In such cases, self-talk could be simultaneously self-selected/automatic and assigned/strategic, adding confusion to the distinction between these self-talk types. Hardy (2006) described the self-determined nature of self-talk as falling on a continuum from assigned to freely chosen, which may be a helpful heuristic for understanding how self-talk is used in practice. Although the distinction between assigned/strategic and self-selected/automatic self-talk is important in research design, its value in applied settings is less clear.

Self-talk Strategies

Strategies designed to assess self-talk in situation include (DeSouza, DaSilveira & Gomes, 2008; Guerrero, 2005; Miles & Neil, 2013; Peters & Williams, 2006):

- Videotaping behaviour and reviewing the video with the performer to reconstruct self-talk used during the performance;
- Asking performers to use imagery to recall their self-talk used during performance;
- Interviewing participants about their self-talk during performance;
- Having athletes speak their self-talk aloud while performing;
- Asking performers to write their self-talk via thought listing and sentence completion techniques; and
- Using a combination of these and related procedures.

Self-Talk Techniques in Sports for Performance Enhancement

Figuring out how to change self-talk from negative to positive is one of the psychological skill each athlete ought to have. Not exclusively will it enhance their performance, however it will likewise enhance their mental toughness. There are four techniques by Detling (2014) that can help athlete change their self-talk. However, before athlete learn the self-talk techniques, it is important that they are aware of their current self-talk. Some athletes find it hard to learn the techniques because they are not aware of how their self-talk is affecting their performance. That's why it is important to take the time to become aware of what their self-talk is and how it affects their game. Competitors can do this by remembering their good and bad games. Then determine what their self-talk was during those times and its effect on their performance. Once athlete is aware of their self-talk, then they can start learning how to use the self-talk techniques.

- **Awareness and Refocusing**

The first technique that athlete need to master is to refocus their mind when distracted by negative thoughts. When these thoughts enter their mind, they should be able to notice them right away and refocus the mind to the task at hand. It is important to just become aware of the negative thoughts, and redirect the mind to what you need to do.

- **Thoughts Stoppage**

The second technique is to use a picture or word to stop negative thoughts from entering. Some athletes use the stop sign in order to block away the distracting thoughts from entering their mind. They can also use the color red, the word stop itself, or a red stop light.

- **Countering**

The next technique in changing self-talk in sports is called countering. Its goal is to use reasoning to make their thoughts turn to something helpful or positive. This technique can be used to disprove something athlete believes in that has led to their dismal performance. For instance, competitors can use a good performance in the past to change your attitude at present.

- **Reframing**

Lastly, there's reframing. It is looking at the current situation in a different point of view. This technique is useful in helping athlete see a game situation in terms of what could have happened, instead of what to avoid. These self-talk techniques can help improve mental toughness and performance. Not only that, but the techniques will also benefit athlete outside of the playing field. Athlete will not waste their mental energy on ordinary stuff but instead, use that energy to focus on what they need to do (Detling, 2014).

Steps for Developing a Positive Self-Talk Habit

- **Choose A Mantra**

To get started with creating a more positive self-talk, choose one of two mantras you can use during your training. This could be a simple affirmation, such as "I feel strong," or the mantra "Go, Go, Go," or another simple, positive phrase you can repeat over and over.

- **Practice Multiple Scenarios**

Once you have developed the habit of repeating this phrase during practice to the point where it is automatic, start expanding the dialogue so that you have familiar and comfortable statements for a variety of situations during your sport. For example, if you are cycling and reach a hill, you might say, "I'm a great hill climber," or "I've done this before and it's doable." If you get dropped from the pack you can say, "Anything can happen, and I'm definitely not out of this. Don't let up."

- **Create A Positive Mental Image or Visualization**

The phrases and words you choose should be those that you can immediately call up and create a visual picture of yourself doing exactly what you say. The image along with the words is a powerful combination that creates a positive message tied to a belief. (Hatzigeorgiadis, et al. 2011).

Importance of Positive Self-Talk

Ford (2017) highlighted five importance of self-talk as listed below:

1. **It Helps Boost Confidence**

Most of the time, negative self-talk can hinder an individual from performing at their fullest. This gives them second thoughts about their ability to carry out the task. With positive self-talk, an individual can put their doubts on the wayside – so they can focus on accomplishing their feat with flying colors. Those who are successful at what they do truly believe in themselves and their abilities. In fact, confidence is so important to success that many psychologists believe that it is one of the primary prerequisites to personal and professional success.

2. **It Introduces Optimistic Thoughts — That Save from Depression**

Depressed people often feel useless, worthless and hopeless. Not only does it take a toll on the mind, it affects the body as well. Depressed people exhibit a variety of physical symptoms, such as sleeplessness, eating problems and lethargy, to name a few. If an individual suffer from depressive mood, positive self-talk can help them turn the other way around. Optimistic thoughts such as "I can do

this” and “The world is a beautiful place” can pull such individual away from the path that leads to depression.

3. **It Eliminates Stress**

Stress can truly get the best of any individual, as it affects every bit of their persona. So if such individual wants to escape from the mental and physical burdens of stress, then positive self-talk is something that can help them out. According to the American Heart Association, positive self-talk can help control stress. As a result, it makes an individual feel calmer and less anxious.

4. **It Shields Your Heart**

Stress is one of the many aggravating factors that can lead to cardiovascular diseases. Since positive self-talk can reduce stress, it gradually lowers the risk of suffering from heart problems as well. Supporting this claim is a study conducted by Susanne Pedersen, a researcher from Tilburg University, Netherlands. In her research, results show that those who have positive outlooks in life demonstrated lower risks for mortality – at least in the next five years.

5. **It Can Help You Improve Your Performance in Anything You Do**

If an individual is very tired and drained, having run several kilometers for a marathon, just when they think of giving up, positive self-talk can give them the nudge they need in order to go on and finish the race. An essential part of sports psychology, positive self-talk can help athletes reduce their pre-race jitters and performance anxieties, and help them get in the zone.

In fact, studies show that continuous positive self-talk can help an athlete enhance his overall performance. **But positive self-talk isn't only for athletes.** It is also just as important for professional and personal success. If an athlete in an individual sport like swimming is preparing for the finals, positive self-talk will give them the right mindset to do so. While positive self-talk can make an individual become a better performer, the key to achieving this is to make their internal conversations feasible and possible. It will help them convince themselves that they can go all out to win; hence they tend to give their absolute best at the event.

Conclusion

Self-talk in sports enhances performance and let athlete remain focused, stay motivated, and work harder. It is critical for competitor to dependably be in a positive way, they should figure out how to be their own particular greatest fan, achievement and success will follow. Replacing self-talk from negative to a more positive one wouldn't occur over night, if athlete find their self often struggling, it will take some work and time. However, if the competitor locates their self frequently battling, unfit to

accomplish their objectives and talking their self-down, at that point they should grit their teeth and focus on the procedure of progress. By following the above tips to positive self-talk, they will encounter a change and improvement in the quality of their life. Best of all, athlete will feel empowered with the change in energy, and they are more likely to reach their highest potential and achieve success.

References

- Bénabou, R., & Tirole, J. (2002). Self-confidence and personal motivation. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *117*, 871-915.
- Bunker, L., Williams, J., & Zinsser, N. (1993). Cognitive techniques for improving performance and building confidence. In J.M. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (2nd ed., 225–242). Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield
- Burnett, P. C. (1995). Children's self-talk and significant others' positive and negative statements. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Chroni, S. (1997). Effective verbal cues make the skier's and coach's lives easier. *American Ski Coach*, *18*, 13–19.
- Conroy, D. E., & Metzler, J. N. (2007). Patterns of self-talk associated with different forms of competitive anxiety. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, *26*, 69-89.
- Craft, L.L., Magyar, T.M., Becker, B.J., & Feltz, D.L. (2003). The relationship between the competitive state anxiety inventory-2 and sport performance: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *25*, 44-65.
- DeSouza, M. L., DaSilveira, A., & Gomes, W. B. (2008). Verbalized inner speech and the expressiveness of self-consciousness. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *5*, 154– 1701.
- Detlling, N. (2014). Self-Talk: What you say to yourself. Retrieved from <http://headstrongconsulting.com/2018/16/09/self-talk-say>.
- Evans, J.&Stanovich, K.E. (2013). Dual-process theories of higher cognition: Advancing the debate. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *8*, 223–241.
- Ford, A., (2017). The importance of positive self-talk. Retrieved on the 13th March, 2019 from <https://examinedexistence.com/the-importance-of-positive-self-talk>.
- Guerrero, M.C.M. (2005). *Inner speech-L2: Thinking words in a second language*. New York: Springer.
- Hardy, J., (2006). Exploring coaches' promotion of athlete self-talk. *Hellenic Journal of Psychology*, *3*, 150–163.
- Hatzigeorgiadis, A., Galanis, E., Zourbanos, N., &Theodorakis, Y. (2014). Self-talk and competitive sport performance. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *26*, 82-95.
- Hatzigeorgiadis, A., Zourbanos, N., Galanis, E., &Theodorakis, Y. (2011). Self-talk and sport performance: A meta-analysis. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *6*, 354–362.

- Helmstetter, S. (1982). *What to say when you talk to yourself*. Scottsdale, AZ: Grindle Press.
- Holland, T. (2003). Self-talk and the endurance athlete. *AMAA Journal*, 16(1), 18-19
- Judy L. Van Raalte, J., & Andrew V., (2017). Self-Talk in sports performance. Retrieved on the 15th of March 2019 from oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.157
- Kahneman, D. (2003). A perspective on judgment and choice: Mapping bounded reality. *American Psychologist*, 58, 697–720.
- Kross, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Park, J., Burson, A., Dougherty, A., & Shablack, H., (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 304–324
- Lundqvist, C. (2011). Well-being in competitive sports—The feel-good factor? A review of conceptual considerations of well-being. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 109-127.
- Miles, A., & Neil, R. (2013). The use of self-talk during elite cricket batting performance. 14, 874–881.
- Peters, H.J. & Williams, J.M. (2006). Moving cultural background to the foreground: An investigation of self-talk, performance, and persistence following feedback. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 240–253.
- Pitt, T., Wolfson, S., & Moss, M. (2014). Research note: the relationship between fear of failure and self-talk in winning and losing situations. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*, 10 (1), 91-95.
- Puchalska-Wasył, M.M. (2014). When interrogative self-talk improves task performance: The role of answers to self-posed questions. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 374–381
- Ryska, T.A. (1998). Cognitive-behavioral strategies and precompetitive anxiety among recreational athletes. *The Psychological Record*, 48, 697-708.
- Senay, I., Albarracín, D., & Noguchi, K. (2010). Motivating goal-directed behavior through introspective self-talk: The role of the interrogative form of simple future tense. *Psychological Science*, 499–504.
- Son, V., Jackson, B., Grove, J. R., & Feltz, D.L. (2011). “I am” versus “we are”: Effects of distinctive variants of self-talk on efficacy beliefs and motor performance. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 1417–1424.
- Stanulis, R.N., & Manning, B.H. (2002). The teacher's role in creating a positive verbal and nonverbal environment in the early childhood classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 3-8.
- Van Raalte, J. L., Cornelius, A. E., Hatten, S. J., & Brewer, B. W. (2000). The antecedents and consequences of self-talk in competitive tennis. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 22, 345–356.
- Van Raalte, J.L, Brewer, B. W., Rivera, P. M., & Petitpas, A. J. (1994). The relationship between observable self-talk and competitive junior tennis players' match performances. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 16, 400–415.

- Van Raalte, J. L., Vincent, A., & Brewer, B. W. (2016). Self-talk: Review and sport specific model. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 22, 139–148.
- Zell, E., Warriner, A. B., & Albarracín, D. (2012). Splitting of the mind: When the you I talk to is me and needs commands. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3, 549–555