

# Innervoice, time, task planning & practice

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When we have a conversation, we are often actually having two: one with the person we're talking to and one with ourselves. This handout suggests ways to help students develop and use their *innervoice*.

## Working with dialogs

Many textbooks have dialogs. Have students work in pairs or alone (or let them decide which they want to do). They read the dialog and the talk about or write the *innervoice* conversations for the characters.

### Options and variations:

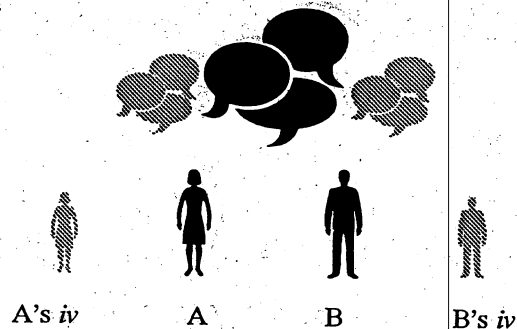
**Hint** Even though the dialog is in the student's book, you might want to photocopy it in the middle of a large (B4 or A3) sheet of paper to give learners more space to write.

- You might want to introduce the dialog slowly, one exchange at a time. Have learners cover it in their book and only look at the part they are working on. They think about the *innervoice* for the information they have so far.

- Decide if you want them to create the *innervoice* for both (or all) the characters or just one. The later is more like real life (we know our own *innervoice* but not that of the people we talk to). However, many students like writing both parts, since it is interesting to come up with conflicting *innervoice*.

- If you want them to practice the conversation aloud, it is interesting

to do two-person conversations in groups of four: A, A's *innervoice*, B, B's *innervoice*. They read the dialog, then change partners and continue.



Like real conversations, most dialogs fall somewhere on a continuum of transactional language (exchanging information) and interactional (social) language such as small talk. Interactional dialogs often make for more interesting *innerspeech* although learners sometimes come up with interesting – and often funny – subplots for transitional dialogs:

Clothing store clerk: What size?

Shopper: Medium, I think.

Clerk: Here you are.

Clerk's *innervoice*: Medium?

You look fatter than that. How about super jumbo extra large?)

- Even if you don't like the idea of students practicing dialogs doing *innervoice* exercises can be useful because it gets learners looking at the discourse of the dialog.

I learned the term *innervoice* and the techniques of using it with texts from Brian Tomlinson.

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**Dialogs as gibberish.** Many teachers have learners practice dialogs as a way to doing pronunciation practice. One way to encourage them to mentally listen to how the sentences are said (stress-timing, intonation, etc.) is to have them actually say nonsense syllables instead of the real words. They have to say the sentences mentally in order to "translate" them into sound such as "blah-blah-blah."



## Target language and the

**senses.** The *innervoice* is not just aural.

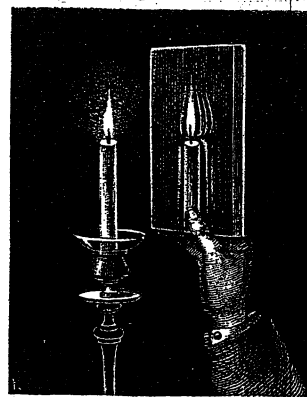
It involves all the senses. (To demonstrate what this means, think about the scene from the film *Sister Act 2* [if you haven't seen it, just imagine]. Whoopi Goldberg, playing the part of a music teacher/nun walks into a classroom that is in chaos. None of the students are paying attention. They are talking and doing everything except studying. They pay no attention to her until she arches her fingers, digs all five fingernails firmly into the chalkboard, and scrapes them across the length of the board — creating a horrible image you just heard, saw and maybe even felt — in your *innervoice*.)

Most textbooks have a language box or something similar that presents or reminds the learners of the type of language they are likely to need for a given activity. The ideas on page 3 of this handout, "target structures and the senses" are ways to have the learners focus on that the target language in ways that make use of different sense modalities. The three main senses that are used in the classroom are visual, auditory and kinesthetic (touch). Everyone has different preferred modalities. I usually introduce one of these activities in each class. After a couple of months, the students know a range of sensory ways to practice and are able to choose the one(s) they want to use.

In addition to the direct benefit of having learners think about the forms they will need to use, doing this type of activity before an activity means that the forms can come back mentally (i.e., the student can 'notice' the language they need during the activity. This can develop grammar awareness. During the activity, when they aren't certain how to say something automatically, they tend to think about the form. First they start to notice the form, then they notice the gap between the target and the way they are using it. Eventually they are able to close that gap. This process is part of the *FonF* (Focus on Form) approach to grammar awareness.

## Positive voices in your head.

Psychologists tell us that students with positive self-esteem and self-talk do better (no surprise there). Have each student write about



five positive sentences about themselves (*I'm good at..., I do ... very well, I'm a good...*). The sentences can be about themselves as learners but some can also be about themselves as friends, sons/daughters, a spouse, parents, etc.

After writing the sentences, students work in groups of about five. One person sits in the middle. That person teaches a different one of their sentences to each partner. Partners pay particular attention to matching the intonation. Then the person in the middle closes their eyes. Partners walk around the person, repeating the sentence. Note that they are speaking in the first person (*I'm good at..., not You're good at...*) and that everyone is speaking at the same time. They do this for about a minute. The person in the middle just listens, and enjoys. Then they change partners. (I learned this from Charles Adamson and Tim Murphey).

# Language models and the senses

These are techniques help students use different senses to work with different language forms. I usually introduce them one at a time, after learners already know what they will be doing in a particular task. The letters (V-A-K) indicates the main sense(s) used:



V= visual/sight



A= auditory/hearing



K= kinesthetic/touch  
(also called "haptic")

- **Listen & Repeat.** Say each sentence. Students pause a few seconds and think about what they heard. Cue them say it. (Note - this is very traditional so it's an easy way to introduce sensory work.)

(A-K)

- **Silent L & R** (*Listen & Repeat*) Say each sentence. Students pause and then repeat it without making any sound.

They pay attention to their lips, teeth, tongue, etc. and think about pronunciation. (K-A)

- **Rubber band rhythm.** Get very large rubber bands. Each student gets one. They stretch the rubber band with the stressed words in the target sentences as they say them. (K, A)

- **Nonsense syllables.** Read the target sentences. Students repeat using nonsense syllables (*LA la LAlala*), matching the stress/rhythm (K-A).

- **Look at the words.** Students close their eyes. Say each sentence. Students imagine the words and notice how they are written. Typed or by hand? What color are the words? They can mentally change the color of words, underline key grammar items, etc. (V-A)

- **Whose voice?** Students close their eyes. Say each sentence. Students repeat it in their minds. Ask students to think about the voice they heard when they repeated it. Was it yours or their own? They repeat it in their own voice.

(A)

- **Which accent?** Like *Whose voice?* but students think about the accent. Did they hear it with native or non-native accent? They imagine it with a very strong non-native accent. Then

accent. Finally, they imagine it in their own voice, with a native-like accent. (A)

- **Picture this.** Students close their eyes. Say the sentences. Students image a scene that shows the meaning of the sentence. Then they imagine the sentence next to the picture. Then, mentally, they repeat the sentence. (V-A)

- **Pictures and words.** (Use this when the forms/sentences involve a particular theme such as shopping, a sports event, etc.) This is similar to *Picture this*. Students imagine themselves in the picture. Then they mentally write the sentence next to the picture. To review, give them a key word from each sentence. They think of the picture and try to remember the sentence. (V-A)

- **Write now.** Say each sentence. Students "write" with their fingers on their other hand or some rough surface. Some students will want to close their eyes as they do this. Others will want to say the words, mentally or aloud as they do it. (K and, with options, V-A)

- **Writing in the air.** (Use this when you have several example sentences, a language map, etc.) Students work in pairs. One chooses a key sentence and writes it with a finger in the air (or on the partner's back or hand). The partner watches (or feels) and guesses the sentence. (K-V)

- **That makes sense.** This involves all the senses. Students close their eyes. Say each sentence. Students imagine themselves saying the sentence. As they do, they imagine each sentence appearing next to the picture of themselves. They listen to the voice as

# Talk to yourself!

Independent, mental practice activities

These are things you can do on your own. They are ways to improve your English just by thinking about what you *could* say. Many students come to school by bus or train. That is a good time to practise in your mind. Try to stand or sit where you can look out of the window.

As you walk or ride the bus or train, look at things you see. How many can you name in English? (*Trees. Children. A drinks machine.*)

...

Continue naming things. Try adding adjectives, then sentences. (*Green trees. Noisy children. A man walking. He's really cute.*)

...

When you see people you don't know, imagine what you would say if you introduced yourself (you don't have to introduce yourself – just imagine). Try to use lots of different information. (*Hi. I'm xxx. I'm a student at xxx. That's a really beautiful shirt. Can I ask where you bought it?*)

...

As you ride a bus somewhere, imagine that you are taking a taxi. The taxi driver doesn't know where you want to go, so you have to give directions the whole time. (*Turn right at the gas station. Now go straight. When you get to the signal, turn left.*)

...

About once a day, see how many of the new words you can remember from class. Then think of a sentence using each word.

...

Once a day (at night or on the bus, etc), think about your day or the day before. Tell yourself what you did (*I got up at about x o'clock and had xxx for breakfast. I went to English class. It was lots of fun ...*)

...

Think about your day. What is the best thing that happened to you today? Do this every day. (*I had an interesting talk with my friend. We talked about ...*)

Close your eyes. Remember a good experience you had. It can be useful to notice your five senses – what did you see, hear, feel, taste and smell. In your mind, watch the story the way you would watch a movie. Now replay the movie. This time, think about how you would tell the story in English as you watch.

...

This week, any time you make a plan (for yourself or with someone else), think about how you would say it in English. (*I need to do my homework. I'll do that tonight after dinner.*) If you make a plan with a friend who is in this class, actually do it in English.

...

Notice when you are talking to yourself in your first language. (We all do this; it is called an *innervoice*.) What would your innervoice say if it were speaking English? (It is especially interesting to notice when what you are thinking is very different from what you are saying.)

...

Every day, say at least five positive sentences about yourself and your future. They can be the same, or you can change them. (*My English is getting better every day. Someday I'm going to ...*)

...

Think about all the positive things you heard today. They are all true. Remember them – and the feeling – every day.

You have now tried over ten 'Talk to yourself' innervoice activities. Which did you like the most? Keep doing it!

## Getting ready: preview and rehearsal activities.

### What are the questions?

A common ice-breaker activity has learners either write bits of information about themselves or draw pictures of things they've done, hope to do, etc. Partners then look at the information and ask questions or guess what the words/pictures means. Instead of having them guess right away, have students stand and circulate. Have them look at their partner's page. They should imagine what it means or questions they would like to ask. They can do this with several partners.

*Your own innervoice may be asking: But how do I know they are doing their imagining in English?*

*I'm not sure you want them to, at least at the beginning. Our learners are able to think of much deeper (and more interesting) questions in the mother tongue. If we demand English too soon, we often lock them into questions at a much lower language and cognitive level than they are capable of. Remember, our students have a deep background of studying English vocabulary and grammar. Give them time to think about the content of their questions, then ask them to think about how they can ask them in English.*

**Mental rehearsal (shorter exchanges)** – In activities such as pairwork where students ask each other a series of questions and answer with short responses (3-5 sentences), give them a couple of minutes to look over their page and think of their own answers to the questions they will be asking their

partner. Note that they don't need to do this for the whole page. Even doing it for a couple of items will encourage them to use their *innervoice* and to become more familiar with the activity.

### Mental rehearsal (longer bits)

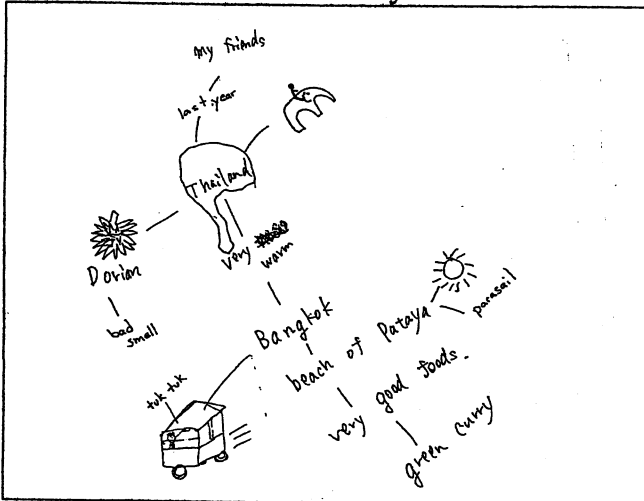
When learners will be doing longer monologs or explanations (for example, talking about their families, describing a personal experience, telling a story, etc.), give them time to practice what they will say mentally. One way to give them the support to do this is to ask them to close their eyes. In a soft, supportive voice, ask a series of questions that will help them clarify what they want to say. Pause to have them think of answers (e.g., You will talk about your family. Think about your mother. What will you say about her? Her name? What she does? What she looks like? Her personality? Something she is good at? What will you say about your mom?, etc.). After you have guided them through the whole monologue, give them about a minute to mentally practice what they will say.

**Hints** The WH- words (who, what, when, where, why, how) are a good place to start for most mental rehearsals.

Background music is useful during mental rehearsal (in part, to relax teachers who aren't comfortable with silence). Some people prefer light classical. Another option is New Age. I often use chant-like music in other languages such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo (Zulu) or Ondar (Tuvan).

## Mind maps as mental rehearsal

Having learners prepare 'mind maps' on topics they will talk about prepares them naturally since they have to focus on what they want to say. Mind maps have an advantage over regular outline writing because they are not linear. Students can add extra information and switch subtopics as they choose. This makes them similar to the way we think.



### Mind map suggestions:

- Use large sheets of paper. B4 or A3 is better than notebook size.
- Have them use the paper horizontally, not vertically.
- The main topic goes in the middle of the page. It can be a word or picture.
- Students write additional notes on branches. They should write whatever they think of. Maybe they won't talk about every detail but they can "edit" later.
- They shouldn't write full sentences. Single words or sets of 2-3 words work well.
- Simple pictures are great. So are numbers, dates, etc.
- Again, thinking about the WH-questions is a good place to start.
- Like anything else, making mind maps gets easier with practice. Have learners make them regularly.

## Vocabulary work and the *innervoice*

Words need to be met, in context, several times. That "remeeting" can be mental.

- **Close your books. How many words can you remember? (mental review)** Once students have completed an activity like a pairwork or group work, have them close their books. In groups of two or three, have them list (orally or in writing), as many words related to the topic of the pairwork as they can. If there was a lot of new vocabulary, you may want to focus on that. To do the activity as a game, give them a set amount of time. They get one point for each word they've remembered. Then they join another group. They read out their lists and get one point for each word they remembered that the other team didn't.

### Words I'm going to remember.

During a class where a lot of new vocabulary has come up, students each choose about three words that they want to remember. Ask them to close their eyes and get a mental picture showing the meaning. Above the picture on the left, they mentally write the word. They hear each letter as they write it. They then hear the word being pronounced. (Note, if any students have difficulty visualized the picture or the word, have them write the word with their finger on the palm of their other hand. Adding this kinesthetic element usually makes visualizing easier.)

Once they've done this for all three words, have them decide on a time when they will mentally review the words. It should be a time when

they are alone or at least not talking to anyone. They get a mental image of something specific that they are doing (sitting in the bathtub, pouring a cup of coffee, etc.). Tell them to think of that situation. Then, when it happens later in the day, they should remind themselves to think of the three words and the images. Many students prefer to close their eyes when they do this. They should do this everyday from now to the next class. Next class, spend a couple minutes reviewing the activity.



### **"Watch the movie**

**(in your mind)"**

Once students have done a listening task, have them close their eyes. Play the recording again and have them imagine the conversation or story. It can be interesting to have students, in pairs or small groups, compare what they "saw," especially with items not directly talked about (Where were the speakers? What did the interviewer look like? Etc.)

**You choose.** Teaching and learning is much more than having students do a bunch of stuff and hoping it sticks. Learners can be active partners in choosing what they learn. Try giving them a few minutes of silence at the end of each class to think about what they did, what was new and what they want to remember.

### **One more time with feeling: revisiting activities.**

As teachers, we often avoid doing the same activity twice. We worry about the students getting bored. However, if students are talking about real information, ideas and

experiences, they often enjoy doing activities again with new partners. The first time they were both learning the activity and engaging in the communication. The second time around, they can focus more on the communication. It's like the first time was a rehearsal for the second.

Sometimes, it is as simple as doing a pairwork a second time. Those who used the *A* page the first time, use the *B* page this time.

### **Fluency frames for revisiting topics.**

"Fluency frames" are activity frameworks. They are not limited to any particular topic, function or grammatical point. To use them, choose a topic or question related to what your students have been doing. Generally personalized topics are best. At times, you might want to give students a choice of two or three different topics.

### **Fluency Workshop**

Write the topic on the board.

Students work in pairs.

One member of each pair speaks about the topic for exactly two minutes. The other member listens. Then the person listening must ask at least one question.

Then the second student (the person who listened the first time) speaks for two minutes. The partner listens and asks at least one question.

Everyone changes partners to begin round two. Round two is a repeat of the first round except that the speaking time is cut to 90 seconds. Students give the same "mini-speeches" they gave the first time, but a little more quickly.

Change partners again and do round three. In this round, cut the speaking time to 75 seconds.

The entire activity usually takes 25-30 minutes. The actual speaking time for each round can be changed to meet the needs and abilities of your students, but we find the 120/90/75-second time ratio to work well with most students.

### **Mouth Marathon**

Write the topic on the board.

Students work in pairs. Each speaker tries to talk about the topic as long as possible. The partner times the speaker. The speaker must stop when one of three rules is broken: 1) Do not pause for more than 5 seconds. 2) Do not recite lists (numbers, days, etc.) 3) Everything you say must be in English. If you say a word that is not English, you are out.

As partners listen and time, you may want them to count the second partner's pause behind their backs. If the partner who has stopped can see the person counting, it is often difficult to get started again.

The winner is the student who speaks for the longest time.

After each round, the students change partners. This time, each student who speaks longer than they did the first round wins (so both people in a pair could be winners). Because of the 5-second time limit, it is rare for anyone to speak longer than three minutes.

### **Line up.**

Write the topic on the board.

Students stand in parallel lines. Each student should be facing another. Facing students are partners for the first round. On your signal, the students talk about the topic for exactly one minute. After one minute, have the students change partners. This is easily done by

having each member of the first line move one person forward. The first person goes to the back of the line. When all students are facing their new partners, have them discuss the topic, again for one minute.

This process continues as long as time and interest permits. It should be done at least five times.

### **Out and back**

When learners have created something like a project, a poster, a tour map, etc. in pairs or small groups, have them tell other students about it. One student stays with the item (let's assume a project for this explanation) while the other goes out and visits at least five other projects. The students who remain at their project talk about it. The other students ask questions, then move on to another group's project. After either hearing about a specified number of projects or a given time period, the students who have been moving round return to their own project and their partners go out to look at other people's projects. To maximize the amount of practice – you want each person explaining their project five or more times – have half the students moving and half staying with their projects at any one time.

**Notes:** The purpose of this handout is to suggest classroom application for *innervoice* work. For more of the theoretical background, see: Tomlinson, Brian "The Inner Voice: A Critical Factor in L2 Learning"

*The journal of the imagination in language teaching and learning*. 2001 Vol. VI

Available online at

<http://www.njcu.edu/cill/journal-index.html>

Some of the people whose work I've found

useful include Brian Tomlinson, Hitomi

Masahara, Jane Revell, Susan Norman, Adrian

Underhill, Judy Gilbert, Miles Craven.

*I appreciate feedback. Email me.*