



OPTIMIZATION OF SPORTS PERFORMANCE THROUGH SELF-TALK TECHNIQUE: AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the optimization effect of self-talk technique on soccer trapping performance abilities of players in Government-owned Universities in Enugu State of Nigeria. To facilitate the study, three (3) research questions and one hypothesis were formulated. The study adopted pretest-posttest non-equivalent control group design. The population for the study consisted of all the top sixty four (64) soccer players drawn from the two Government-owned Universities in Enugu State, all of whom were used for the study. The instrument used was McDonald Soccer Test. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was the main statistical tool used to analyze the data. Based on the analysis, the following findings were made: (1) The experimental group had higher pre and post mean scores on the soccer trapping ability tests than the control group; (2) The mean gain difference score of the experimental group was also significantly higher than those of the control group, showing that self-talk technique is very effective in enhancing the soccer trapping ability of the players. Among other recommendations made are that regular seminars and workshops on the imperatives of psychological skills training be organized and that the services of sport psychologists be solicited for regular training and monitoring of players on self-talk and other psychological skills which promise better sports performance.

Keywords: Psychological skills, Self-talk, Soccer trapping skill, Positive thinking and Believability

Introduction

As any coach with high-stakes in sports can tell you, the search for scientific procedures that have promises of optimizing their athletes performance has been a millennial task that has denied many sport scientists the comfort of rest. From the psychological perspective, sport psychology emerged with an intent to optimize athlete's performance over opponents by way of training on mental or psychological skills. Psychological skills are tools for the mind used to situate ones thought and concentration appropriately when performing of a given task. This may have informed Nam, Kim and Chos (2022) definition of sport psychological skills as the

techniques and strategies for achieving optimal performance by regulating psychological factors that interfere with performance in sport competitions. They are therefore a prerequisite for mental competencies that indirectly reflect in the overall improvement of physical skills. Precisely, according to Ikulayo (2009), there are about twenty-five of such psychological skills among which is self-talk. More importantly, self-talk has been identified as one of the top four prominent psychological skills (Barker, Slater, Barker-Ruchti & McCarthy, 2023).

Perhaps, it may be unsubstantial if an individual at any point in awake state claim a disconnect between him and a continuous running dialogue in his head. This dialogue which may be transmitted either as unspoken words (thoughts) or openly verbalized simply represents the construct of self-talk. For short, self-talk refers to silently or loudly verbalized words addressed to oneself and which in one way or the other influences ones thoughts and actions. It is a multidimensional phenomenon and many years of its study, has extended our knowledge of its four dimensional nature to include the calmness nature (relaxing words e.g. Take it easy, calm down); instructional dimension (directives e.g. step out, Extend your arm); motivational dimension (encouraging words e.g. go for it, consider it done) and focus dimension (concentrating words e.g. Don't think about anything, just concentrate, disregard the crowd, aim at the ring and basket).

It is most reasonable to assume that it is positive, rather than negative self-talk that generates the needed improvement in sports performance. Positive self-talk is facilitated and sustained by two other functional factors: positive thinking and believability. Positive thinking is all about changing negative self-talk to positive one. Examples abound, for instance, changing negative self-talk like I have never experienced this task to positive self-talk like it is a wonderful opportunity for me to experience this task for the first time. Other examples are There is no way this task can be done to others do it, why can't I; This is a complex and complicated task to innovations will be introduced in tackling this task; I want to quit, I am tired to I don't quit when tired but when I am done; There are chances of failing in this task to "success is failure turned inside out through effort among others. These pronouncements however remain latent unless acted upon by the second factor (believability). Belief is a self-fulfilling prophecy ever rooted in human activity because as the saying goes, if you do not say I can, nobody says you can and if you don't think you can do it, you just won't. Athletes think positively when they believe they can do something effectively; that is, when they think in a self-efficacious manner. Realization of positive self-talk therefore demands that the positive statements so made must be believed to be true, possible and achievable on every deep level.

The art and science of positive self-talk is such that can be learnt and developed through either general or professional training. The general independent training approach as can be adopted by any individual is guided by three rules listed as choosing a specific mantra,

practicing multiple scenarios and creating positive mental images and visualizations (Exercise and Sports Science, 2020). The mantra is a simple positive word of any specific self-talk dimension which an athlete can repeatedly use during training till it becomes automatic. Being so automatic, the athlete uses the dialogue in addressing his particular game self-talk substance or issues (i.e. applying it in practicing multiple-scenarios, for example, passing, dribbling, throwing or shooting in soccer) and finally incorporating mental images and visualization around the game self-talk substance as such images help to increase the vividness of the statements made. For instance, if an athlete tells himself, I can do it possibly referring to clearing a given high jump bar, he is to also visualize himself actually scaling over the bar as he repeats the statements to himself, otherwise, without such visualization, and with possible presence of negative self-talk, the jumper may rather than clear the bar, run pass below it.

However, when it comes to the professional training on self-talk, the paradigm can involve three psychological skills training phases usually instituted by the sport psychologist (Ikulayo, 2009). These are the learning (cognitive) phase, acquisition (associative) phase and the practice (autonomous) phase. At the learning or cognitive phase, the psychologist orally, in the most professional manner, gives the learners the basic concepts of self-talk and as well, explains and demonstrates the art of positive self-talk for them. In doing this, he presents a long list of positive statements (e.g. Let's go, Do your best, No stress, Calm down, "Power", "Easy does it", etc) as well as the negative ones (e.g. "I think I will stop trying", "others are better than I", "I am fed up", "no hope", "I will lose again", "I am not going to make it", "it is all effort in futility", etc). The learners are informed that the training method for self-talk is just as simple as repeating the positive statements severally till the body absorbs, and automatically reproduces, them with the negative ones significantly gated out.

The acquisition (associative) phase follows where the trainees actively mimic the trainer's demonstration on their own with little or no assistance from the trainer. This phase is premised on the fact that practice makes perfect and as such consumes much of both the trainer's and trainee's time, energy, and fund.

Thereafter, the training enters the practice (autonomous) phase which is the final stage that seals the training. This is because at this phase, the training now turns a learner into a practitioner since he can perform the positive self-talk with much dexterity and perfection or at a maximal level of proficiency. It is at this level of proficiency that self-talk can positively impact sports performance including soccer which is undoubtedly one of the most popular sports in the world that engages people worldwide as either players or spectators. Of all the skills of soccer, trapping happens to be one of such that can be used as a testing ground for the positive value of self-talk because apart from being regarded as the hub on which other skills revolve, it plays a central role in controlling the pace and flow of the game.

Although successful sport performance depends on a solid foundation of physical preparation, psychological skills training is an essential component that significantly enhances performance, well-being, and competitive success when integrated with physical, technical, and tactical training (Vealey, 2024). Lange-Smith, Cabot, Coffee, Gumell, and Tod (2024) study further revealed that psychological skills training, including goal-setting, imaging and self-talk techniques has been consistently shown to enhance sports performance across a wide range of athletes and sporting contexts. This is so as most times, a seemingly stronger team fails woefully in the face of a weaker team, which from psychological perspective is attributable to the failure of the coach to drill his players on psychological skills that support the players in standing their ground at certain psychologically challenging periods during competitions. This failure attitude of some coaches to teach the psychological skills (self-talk, inclusive) could leave both the coaches and players in doubt as to the role of self-talk training on the overall athletic performance. This knowledge gap has therefore necessitated the present research on the optimization effect of self-talk on soccer trapping abilities of players in the Government-owned Universities in Enugu State of Nigeria, namely the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) and Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT).

Statement of the Problem

It is unfortunate that no studies known to the researcher had attempted to look at the effectiveness of self-talk on soccer performance of soccer players in the area of the present study. Even such studies outside the area of the present study raise issues that should not be ignored. For example, though self-talk is widely used as a psychological skills training strategy, Reinebo, Altonss, Jansson-Frojmark, Rozentab, and Lundgren (2024) revealed that some studies have reported no significant improvement in athletic performance following self-talk interventions, indicating that its effectiveness depends on contextual and methodological factors. Apart from the fact that most of such studies outside the area of the present study were based on performance of elite soccer players, excluding in most part the amateur institutional players, the findings were further based on the overall soccer competition performances due to a packaged psychological skills training without recourse to its separate effects on specific soccer skills such as trapping as one most important hub on which other skills revolve. The need to address these and other similar issues, therefore triggered this study.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to determine the optimization effect of self-talk technique on trapping skill ability of soccer players in the government-owned universities in Enugu State. However, specifically, this study aimed at determining the following:

- a. The pre-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training and those exposed to normal soccer training routine.

- b. The post-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training and those exposed to normal soccer training routine.
- c. The difference in the pre-test and post-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training and those exposed to normal soccer training routine.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- a. What are pre-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training and those exposed to normal soccer training routine?
- b. What are the post-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training and those exposed to normal soccer training routine?
- c. What difference exists in the pre-test and post-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training and those exposed to normal soccer training routine?

Hypothesis

The hypothesis postulated and tested for the study at 0.5 level of confidence was:

The mean gain soccer trapping scores of government-owned university soccer players in Enugu State exposed to self-talk training and those exposed to normal soccer training routine will not differ significantly.

Methods

Research Design

The research design used was pretest – posttest non-equivalent control group design. The summary of the experimental design is as shown below:

Table 1: Summary of Experimental Design

Group	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental Group A (UNN)	0 ₁	X ₁	0 ₂
Control Group B (ESUT)	0 ₁	X ₂	0 ₂

Where: 0₁ and 0₂ stand for dependent variable (soccer trapping skill test)

X₁ stands for independent variable (self-talk training)

X₂ stands for placebo exercise (normal soccer training routine)

Population

The population comprised all the top 64 soccer players in the two tertiary institutions. This was made up of 16 male and 16 female soccer players from each of the institutions. All of

them were used for the study and so the issue of sample and sampling techniques did not arise.

Instrument for the Study

The instrument used in collecting data on the players' soccer trapping skill ability was the McDonald Soccer Test (see Appendix I).

Validation of the Instrument

Although the instrument has an established validity, it was further validated because its psychometric properties were not available from where it was lifted nor was there any Nigerian-based research known to the researcher that used the instrument as to have established its Nigerian validity. Consequently, the researcher subjected the instrument to face validity by three experts, one in the department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka (NAU) and the other expert in department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). The third valuator was an expert in Measurement and Evaluation from School of Education, Federal College of Education, Eha-Amufu (FCEE) Enugu State. The recommended corrections which were typographic errors were effected before use.

Reliability of the Instrument

For the same reason that this instrument has an established reliability in foreign-based researches but its psychometric properties not accessible to the researcher, the instrument was further put to reliability test. In doing this, data were collected from 20 soccer players drawn from Ebonyi State University (EBSU), Abakiliki. The data were then subjected to Pearson's Correlation method which yielded a satisfactory reliability index of 0.74 that was considered high enough for adopting it for the study.

Experimental Procedure

The four research assistants (i.e. 2 from each institution) who were merely Physical Education Instructors/Soccer coaches were first trained for the study. With their help, the subjects were pre-tested prior to the main training programs. This pre-test was to establish the bottom-line of their efficiency in executing the soccer trapping skill. Thereafter, the training of the subjects commenced. The self-talk training program (STTP) for the experimental group lasted 8 weeks of 2 sessions per week, giving a total of 16 sessions. Each session lasted for 2 hours spread as follows: skill teaching (45 minutes), skill practice, (45 minutes), and evaluation (30 minutes) (see Appendix 2 for the Training Manual). As the experimental group (UNN) trained on self-talk, control group (ESUT) was simultaneously given normal soccer training routine.

The control group was trained on normal soccer training routine (NSTR) used as a placebo training exercise. They trained on 8 routine soccer exercises, 4 of which were on physical fitness (i.e. Leg press-double leg, DumLung-Dumbbell, Step-up jump-Dumbbell and Backward zig-zag-Turn and Run) and 4 on developing specific soccer skills like dribbling (i.e. Right turn dribbling drill and Left turn dribbling drill) and shooting (i.e. penalty box soccer shooting drill and dribbling and shooting drill). Included in the training were warm up exercises, general soccer game session and closing exercises. The entire training lasted for 8 weeks of 2 sessions per week, giving a total of 16 training sessions. Each session lasted for 2 hours, 10 minutes spread as follows: Warm-up exercise (5 mins), skill teaching (30 mins), skill practice (30 mins), general soccer game session (60 mins) and closing exercise (5 mins).

After these trainings, a second test (post-test) was conducted on both the experimental group and control group on soccer trapping ability. This post-test enabled the researcher to compare their baseline scores at the formative stage which revealed the effectiveness of the self-talk training program on their soccer trapping ability.

Method of Data Analysis

While the mean and standard deviations were used in answering all the research questions, the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) enabled inference.

Results

Research Question 1

What are the pre-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training program (STTP) and those exposed to normal soccer training routine (NSTR)?

Table 2: Pre-test mean and Standard Deviation scores of soccer trapping of players exposed to self-talk training program (STTP) and those exposed to NSTR

Pre-Test			
Group	N	Mean	SD
STTP	32	3.91	.96
NSTR	32	3.84	.92

As shown in table 2, the pre-test mean soccer trapping score of soccer players exposed to STTP was 3.91. However, their counterpart exposed to NSTR had a mean score of 3.84. This indicates that prior to training of the subjects, those exposed to STTP had a higher mean score on the soccer trapping ability test than those exposed to NSTR in tertiary institutions in Enugu State.

Research Question 2

What are the post-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to STTP and those exposed to NSTR?

Table 3: Post-test mean and Standard Deviation scores of players exposed to STTP and those exposed to NSTR

Group	Post-Test		
	N	Mean	SD
STTP	32	7.38	1.36
NSTR	32	3.88	0.91

The result displayed in table 3 shows the post-test mean soccer trapping score of soccer players exposed to STTP to be 7.38 while the mean for those exposed to NSTR was 3.88. This shows that after the subjects had trained, those who trained on STTP had higher soccer trapping score than those who trained on NSTR in tertiary institutions in Enugu State.

Research Question 3

What difference exists in the pre-test and post-test mean soccer trapping scores of soccer players exposed to self-talk training program and those exposed to normal soccer training routine?

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation scores of soccer trapping of soccer players exposed to STTP and those exposed to NSTR

Pre-test				Post-test			
Group	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	Mean gain score
STTP	32	3.91	.96	32	7.38	1.36	3.47
NSTR	32	3.84	.92	32	3.88	1.91	0.04

The analysis in table 4 shows the pre-test and post-test mean soccer trapping performance scores of soccer players that were exposed to STTP and their counterpart exposed to NSTR. The pre-test and post-test mean scores of those exposed to STTP and NSTR were 3.91 and 3.84, and 7.38 and 3.88 respectively. Their mean gain scores were 3.47 and 0.04 respectively. These indicate that self-talk training program was more effective than normal soccer training program in enhancing soccer trapping ability of soccer players in tertiary institutions in Enugu State.

Hypothesis One

The post-test soccer trapping scores of Enugu State tertiary institutions' soccer players exposed to STTP and those exposed to NSTR will not differ significantly.

Table 5: Summary of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of post-test soccer trapping scores of players exposed to STTP and those exposed to NSTR

Source of Variation	SS	Df	Ms	F	P
Pre-test	2.01	1	2001	1.51	.024
Group	194.44	1	194.4	146.45	.000*
Error	80.99	61	1.33		
Total	2304.00	64			

*Significant

Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference in the post-test mean soccer trapping scores of Enugu State tertiary institutions' soccer players exposed to STTP and those exposed to NSTR after adjusting for the initial differences between groups, $f(1,64) = 146.45$, $p < 0.05$. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected.

Discussion of Findings

In answer to what the pre-test mean soccer trapping scores of the players exposed to self-talk training program (STTP) and those exposed to normal soccer training routine (NSTR) would be, table 2 revealed that those exposed to STTP with a mean of 3.91 was slightly higher than those exposed to NSTR with a mean of 3.84 even before the experimental group (i.e. STTP group) were exposed to the self-talk training program. Since there was no randomization of the two groups based on either skill level or experience on general psychological skill training program that includes self-talk training, the simple deduction here is that the experimental group were by either nature or accident better soccer trappers. This could be attributed to a number of conjectural guesses, to wit; the experimental group may have been more experienced through conscious training on soccer training skill or unconsciously taping on psychological skill techniques that included self-talk prior to the treatment than the control group. This is because; research has shown that only experienced players through vicarious experience use psychological skills especially imagery and self-talk to advantage than the inexperienced ones.

Similar to the finding in table 2, table 3 also revealed that the experimental group had a higher post mean soccer trapping score than the control group that was not exposed to self-talk training but to normal soccer training routine. This finding is very apt and should not create any worry since it has the support of many other studies. Researchers, (Lange-Smith et al., 2024; Harrey, Van Raattle & Brewer, 2012 and Van Raattle, Cornelius, Brewer & Hanton, 2010) in their various studies revealed a more steady increase from pre-test scores to post-test scores for participants on psychological skills that included self-talk. Further support to this claim is that forwarded by Hardy, Gammage and Hall's (2011) reviews where it was reported that Olympic qualifiers and national athletes used self-talk to augment skill acquisition. This finding is also highly suggestive of the fact that the experimental group athletes truly adopted the appropriate mechanism for the self-talk training program hence their overall higher post mean score based on their focusing on the positive, rather than negative self-talk type during their training on the self-talk. Justifiably, since researchers have suggested that the aspect of self-talk that improves performance depends on the type of self-talk, it is reasonable to attribute their improved performance to their use of positive self-talk type rather than the negative aspect. Apart from their effective use of the positive self-talk, the experimental group may also be credited to have used positive instructional self-talk regarded as the most appropriate functional quality of self-talk when dealing with technical aspects of sport skill

like the soccer trapping ability test where the execution, timing, and accuracy would demand more of instructional, rather than motivational or focus dimension of self-talk.

As would be expected, table 4 further showed that the mean gain soccer trapping score of those exposed to self-talk training program was significantly greater than those exposed to normal soccer training routine. This finding which is similar to the significant improvement in the soccer pass rate of players exposed to psychological skills training that involved self-talk as reported in Seif-Barghi, Kordi, Memari, Manournia, and Jaladi-Ghoini (2012) study is very much expected in the soccer trapping ability. The fact that the pre-test scores of the two groups were very similar but differ significantly in their post scores implies that the significant higher score of the experimental group is attributable to their being trained on the self-talk when the control group was distanced from the training program, otherwise the difference in their post-test scores could not have been significant.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The main conclusion emerging from this study is that self-talk training program is truly a very powerful tool for optimizing a sport performance skill like soccer trapping as attested to by the experimental group whose training on the skill gave them performance advantage on soccer trapping over the control group that trained on just the normal soccer training routine. This finding therefore suggests that players are likely to be more effective when this self-talk training is integrated with other traditional preparations of athletes for competitions such as the technical, tactical and physical conditioning aspects. With such integration, an opportunity is created for both coaches and sport psychologists to work closely in harmony; a trend that will not only foster cohesion among them but also make coaches appreciate more, the usefulness of the entire psychological skills training program which they hitherto, dismiss as a waste of energy, fund and time.

These being the case, an idea therefore suggest itself here that there is the need to regularly organize seminars and especially workshops with the theme as “Imperatives of self-talk training among other psychological skills training programs” for coaches and athletes. Furthermore, psychological skills training programs should be regularly organized for them even before major competitions since embarking on the training programs only during crisis periods or when the problem has already occurred as practiced by some of the coaches would just be deemed “crying when the head is off”. Just as there is the need for regular training of the players on these programs, so it is for regular monitoring of the players on the progress made because the “notorious” monitoring would determine the direction the program would take in terms of intensity, progression, and overload principles.

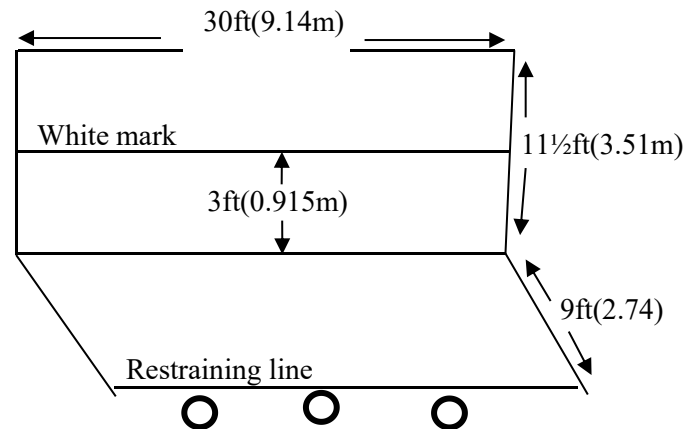
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Appendix 1

McDonald Soccer Test

McDonald Soccer Test is designed to measure general soccer ability, though mainly trapping and shooting skills, and is approximate for most levels.



Faculty and Equipment: A wall 30ft (9.14m) wide and 11½ ft (3.51m) high, with a white mark 3ft(0.915m) high drawn across the wall, 3 soccer balls, and stop watch.

Purpose: To determine the number of times a player can volley the ball within the wall dimension using the leg.

Procedure: A soccer ball is placed on a line marked 9ft (2.7m) from the wall. Another two balls are left 9ft (2.7m) behind the line in center of the test area. On the signal “Go”, the player kicks the ball against the wall as many times as possible in 30 seconds. In the event of a wild ball, the player may either retrieve the original ball or use one of the two balls. It is legal to use hand to retrieve a ball. All kicks must be performed from the ground behind the restraining line. The test is repeated 4 times.

Scoring: The number of snap halt (trapping) of a rebound ball in each 30 seconds is recorded, with highest total being an individual’s score on soccer trapping ability.

Appendix 2

Self-talk Skills Training Programme for Experimental Group

Psychological Skill Intervention	Purpose	Week	Session	Duration 2 hours	Skill Teaching 45 minutes	Skill Practice 45 minutes	Evaluation 30 minutes
Self-talk Training	To develop in the player the ability to talk positively to themselves in a manner that radiates their performance in sports and as well promotes their overall psychological well-being	One (1)	One (1) & Two (2)		The researcher introduced the concept of self-talk, and as well explained and demonstrated the act of positive self-talk training, thus: Self-talk is a multidimensional phenomenon concerned with athletes' verbalizations that are addressed to themselves. The type of self-talk generated by the user will, to a large extent, determines whether performance is improved or impaired. Research has shown that participants in the positive self-talk group usually outperform those in either negative or neutral self-talk group. Athletes often use positive self-talk as a motivation strategy to augment skill acquisition, for controlling attentional focus and to enhance self-confidence. The researcher further informed the players that self-talk can be done in conjunction with meal imagery because it helps to increase the vividness of statements made. For example, if an athlete tells himself "I can do it" possibly referring to clearing a high jump bar, he is to visualize himself actually scaling over the bar as he repeats the statement to himself.	The players were asked to state all that the researcher said	The players were asked the following questions: (i) Define self-talk (ii) State the 3 types of self-talk (iii) How can self-talk be improved?
Self-talk Training	Same as week one session one.	Two (2) – Eight (8)	Three (3) – Fourteen (14)		For proper training in the self-talk, the researcher presented to the players a long list of possible	The players were asked to be repeating all the positive	The players were asked the following questions:

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Psychological Skill Intervention	Purpose	Week	Session	Duration 2 hours	Skill Teaching 45 minutes	Skill Practice 45 minutes	Evaluation 30 minutes
					positive statements as well as the negative ones, which he repeatedly stated before them. He informed them that the training method for self-talk is just as simple as repeating the positive statements severally till the body absorbs them and can automatically reproduce them. Examples of the positive self-talk are as follows: Let's go; Power; Give 10%; Do your best; Strong; Relax; Don't get upset Calm down; No stress; Take a deep breath; Don't worry, take your time and slow down; I believe in me; I am very well prepared; I feel strong I can make it; I believe in my ability; Concentrate on your goals; Focus on what you need to do; Concentrate on your game; Focus on your techniques Concentrate; I can do this. Examples of the negative self-talk are as follows: I am going to lose; I am wrong again; I am not as good as others; I cannot concentrate; What will others think of my poor performance; I want to stop; I want to get out of here; I think I will stop trying; I can't keep going; I am fed up; My body is not in good condition; I am tired; Today, I "suck"; My legs/arms are shaking from tiredness; My body doesn't help me today; What will I do later tonight; I am hungry; I want to take a shower.	statement the researcher made	(i) Differentiate between positive and negative self-talk (ii) State as many positive talk as possible