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## **The Use of the Socratic Method in an English Language Learning Classroom to Develop a Global Professional Skill**

### **Abstract:**

In the global marketplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the idea of learning language specific to business exists as an operative necessity in improving the functionality of a marketable skill set. Similarly, the use of workplace specific terminology acts as a key ingredient in improving the ability to work, converse, and thrive in any environment. However, there is a gap which exists in the ability of an individual to succeed in the workplace despite fluency in business specific terminology. This gap can be remedied with a working understanding of the English language and mastery beyond instructivist methods, using a line of inquiry consistent with modern models of a professional workplace. In this paper, I will explain and discuss the benefits of using the Socratic Method in an English Language Learning course of study to cement the effectiveness and success of English vocabulary and terminology in the workplace.

### **Introduction**

The article presents an analysis of the Socratic Method in the teaching of English towards a specific purpose. The scientific literature states that the goal of Socratic dialogue is to stimulate critical thinking, and this teaching technique is especially popular in studies of political science, law and philosophy because at the core of these lies the discussion that develops the skills and competences of how to express oneself, how to present and defend an opinion and how to reach an agreement. In this article, I will substantiate the idea that Socratic dialogue can be successfully used in developing English language proficiency not only in a classroom setting, but in the professional marketplace as well. The methodological technique of Socrates helps to expand thematic vocabulary in a foreign language and also fosters the use of different grammatical structures through the implementation of organic thought and discussion.

This article will explore three main content areas to support the thesis that Socratic Methodology is an imperative tool in teaching English language mastery necessary to succeed, based on cultural preconceptions especially pronounced in the workplace. The first content area will map the background, operative methodology and main philosophical debates between constructivist and instructivist pedagogical approaches which exist in the classroom.

The second section will seek to posit the Socratic Method and the English language teacher inside of the experience of learning a new language, and examine the facets

which contribute to quality instruction inside a classroom, and the instruction necessary to be able to transition knowledge into practical skills in the workplace.

The third section is predicated on the existence of a successful cultural incorporation of language learning into a business and workplace environment, circling back around to discuss the importance of questioning, supporting and building hypotheses, and discovering and enhancing the pursuit of knowledge through Socratic Method.

This article presents Socratic Method as a way to enhance students' scaffolding of advanced second or third interactional language teaching, especially within the framework of the socio-cultural theory of learning and second language acquisition. This article argues the Socratic Methodology can foster learner agency—an imperative skill in the global marketplace. Predicated on the overarching belief that in order to successfully master interactional aspects of a language necessary for workplace success, one must explore certain strata of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and terminology acquired through open questioning and discussion.

### **1. The use of the Socratic Method as a tool of cultural and linguistic acquisition**

The Socratic Method is a line of pedagogical inquiry which centers around the ability of a student to gain access to information through questioning. According to Socrates, a student is his or her own best teacher, and the way in which a student gains access to higher order thinking and learning is by supplementing pre-existing knowledge with a thorough and rigorous ability to create, maintain, answer and modify questions (F. Lam 2011). Similarly, in learning the English language, questioning is a fundamental aspect inherent in the fabric of most English-speaking countries and a skill which is expected in secondary, university and graduate level discussions.

As F. Lam (2011) states, the Socratic Learning Method is a constructivist learning approach which operates on four existing steps:

1. eliciting relevant preconceptions,
2. clarifying preconceptions,
3. testing one's own hypotheses or encountering propositions, and
4. deciding whether to accept the hypotheses or propositions.

The idea of the Socratic Method stems from ancient practices of knowledge-creation and is heavily relied upon today on multiple levels of instructional approaches. Generally, when using the Socratic Method, an instructor focuses on questioning as the very basis for the acquiring of knowledge. The method itself relies not on an amorphous body of work hovering directly above the student's head, inaccessible to everyone but a prophetic and highly venerated instructor, but instead sees knowledge as a symbiotic component in the interaction of other and self, student and teacher. Not only is it necessary to see this as a valid segue into 21<sup>st</sup> century thought, especially practiced in the workplace, but it is also necessary to explore the methodology in a practical way.

Socratic inquiry relies upon not only the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, but on the ability to create, question, engage and explore the fundamental compo-

nents which make the student, or individual, human. As G. Vlastos states in *The Paradox of Socrates* (1971: 18),

Why rank that method among the great achievements of humanity? Because it makes moral inquiry a common human enterprise, open to everyone. Its practice calls for no adherence to a philosophical system, or mastery of a specialized technique, or acquisition of a technical vocabulary. It calls for common sense and common speech. And this is as it should be, for how a human being should live is everyone's business.

This, in some way, implies a philosophical underpinning towards and in support of the use of Socratic inquiry that is relevant in an English language-learning classroom. The utilization of the formal and informal registers implied by this comment is at the very core of the thesis of this paper, as well as at the core of the success of Socratic inquiry—and the ability for this device to act as a lasting mechanism by which students learn the questioning, inquiry and innovation required in a global marketplace.

The philosophical supports of Socratic Method adequately illustrate John Locke's idea of *Tabula Rasa*, the view that the human mind is born into this world as a blank slate void of innate ideas and only gains knowledge and creates meaning through senses and experiences (L. McNulty 2014).

Driven by this view, the main responsibility of educators is to fill the students' minds with knowledge and information under what F. Lam deems the "Instructionist" approach. According to F. Lam, classrooms generally orbit around the idea that the instructor holds some sort of key to unlocking a world of knowledge previously unavailable to the student. Much in line with Paulo Freire's seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), the idea of Instructionist methodology in an English language learning classroom also supplements the power dynamic between student and teacher in a manner which is not only limited in its ability to produce thoughtful students, but also a manner which effectively isolates the student from the experience of learning, of growing, and essentially of acquiring and synthesizing new information. While Instructionist approaches may be necessary to learn content, the subsequent internalization and implementation of that content cannot be completed or assessed using an Instructionist approach. Furthermore, it cements the idea that there exists a right and a wrong answer—a polarity which, for students seeking to use a new language in a professional context, may lead to increasing discomfort with the articulation of arguments, beliefs, and hypotheses in the workplace (G.A. Scott 2002).

Contrarily, F. Lam points out another varying school of thought when she discusses the idea of the Socratic Method. She argues that the constructivists doubt that human minds start out as blank slates and argue that learning requires the integration of new information with old beliefs. Constructivists believe that learners

come into formal education with a range of prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts that significantly influence what they notice about the environment and how they organize and interpret it... [For learners—M.M.] new knowledge must be constructed from existing knowledge (F. Lam 2011: 27).

Because of this belief, the constructivists argue that an instructor needs to do more than provide direct instructions and new information to the students. Instead, teachers need to pay attention to and resolve the misconceptions of the students in order to facilitate the learning process. Similarly, students need to be tasked with the ability to resolve

and clarify their own misconceptions in order to build lasting structures to succeed outside of the classroom; structures which may be inherent to native speakers of English, but are not necessarily commonplace otherwise (G.S. Giaque 1985)

However, for an educator focusing on the implementation of Socratic Method, it is necessary to plan and anticipate the awareness, mistakes, and misconceptions students may have when using this in a language classroom; especially to the effect of building structures to aid students when they become confused by the use of a certain term, vocabulary, or idiomatic expression. For example, F. Lam gives an example of a scenario used to teach students how to use the Socratic Seminar.

To demonstrate the use of the Method, the following is a scenario where a teacher confronts a common misconception that humans evolved from monkeys. In a lesson on evolution, the biology teacher asks the students to explain the similarities between humans and monkeys. A student suggests that the two are similar because humans evolved from the monkey. The teacher's question has thus elicited the students' misconception. Now the teacher can clarify the student's preconceptions by asking what he meant by the claim that humans evolved from monkeys. The student then answers he meant that monkeys are the ancestors of humans. Now that the student's preconception is elicited and clarified, the student can reformulate his preconception into a proposition: humans and monkeys share biological similarities because humans evolved directly from monkeys; monkeys are the ancestors of humans. Next, the teacher will test this proposition by asking critical questions such as "Does 'monkeys evolved into humans' imply that monkeys haven't evolved since homo-sapiens diverged, where humans have? Why would one branch of the evolutionary tree evolve, not another?", "Some biologists support the view that birds evolved from dinosaurs—this is still under debate but hypothetically, if dinosaurs were birds' ancestors- why aren't these two species similar then?", or "What are the other factors that can explain the similarities between monkeys and humans besides the possibility that humans evolved directly from monkeys?" Through testing the student's hypothesis, the student will have to modify his claim as his misconception becomes more evident (F. Lam 2011: 29).

Most likely, a student will eventually rework their hypothesis as that humans and monkeys may have shared common ancestors at some point within their lineage. Once the student can formulate a proposition that can withstand the test of counter arguments, fallacies, contradictions, etc., the student can decide whether he is willing to accept the proposition at that point. Nevertheless, it is important for the student to keep in mind that no proposition should be taken for granted or accepted permanently without further examination (F. Lam 2011). While it might be reasonable for the student to accept his modified view that humans and monkeys shared common ancestors, the student is encouraged to revisit this belief in face of new information. Bearing in mind, of course, that the ultimate goal for the Socratic Learning Method is not to help students to come up with a proposition that they can rest safely with—this would merely contribute to the creation of dogmas (F. Lam 2011).

The true goal of the Method is to help students examine their own beliefs and new information they encounter. In frequently exercising the Socratic Learning Method, students should become independent learners with curiosity and sensitivity toward new information, and gradually develop a mental habit of active inquiry and vigorous thinking (L.B. Resnick 1987).

## 2. Higher order thinking and the Socratic Method

The idea of higher order thinking is a term that reflects the need for educators to challenge student thinking and encourage not only a versatile range of skills, and the acquisition of new vocabulary and grammatical structures, but the use and successful navigation of these as well. As it stands, the Socratic Method operates on a platform of higher order thinking and questioning, so it is necessary to examine the method within this context, and to discuss how it is best utilized. Scholars, educators, researchers and many experts involved in education advocate teaching “higher order thinking skills” as an aim of education.

The term *higher order thinking skills* means different things to experts across different disciplines nonetheless. For philosophers, higher order thinking skills are associated with critical thinking and logical reasoning; for developmental psychologists, the term goes hand in hand with metacognition; for cognitive scientists, higher order thinking skills are connected to cognitive strategies and heuristics; and, for many educators, higher order thinking skills are related to studying skills and problem solving ability.

The idea of teaching higher order thinking stems from utilizing the best practices of pedagogy and teaching which is organically inherent in an English language-learning classroom. While there are several established methodologies for teaching higher order thinking skills, and fostering a classroom or lecture with a positive reliance on these skills, such methods can be teacher revoicing (G. Banu 2013: 220), and the greater incorporation of student questions, comments and hypotheses into the ongoing and continuous discourse within a classroom. As S. Canagarajah (2014) suggests, it is not only the foreign language teacher’s role to answer questions about the logic of the language but to persuade students to use it.

Despite this, it is necessary to identify and isolate the differing components of higher order thinking skills in order to isolate which interactions are specific to the use of Socratic Method in the English language learning classroom.

Although there are many different significations for the term, educational psychologist L.B. Resnick (1987: 9) points out that there are some essential features of higher order thinking that can help us identify it. These features of higher order thinking include:

1. Higher order thinking is non-algorithmic: the path of action is not fully specified in advance.
2. Higher order thinking tends to be complex: the total path is not “visible” (mentally speaking) from any single vantage point.
3. Higher order thinking often yields multiple solutions, each with costs and benefits, rather than unique solutions.
4. Higher order thinking involves nuanced judgment and interpretation.
5. Higher order thinking involves the application of multiple criteria, which sometimes conflict with one another.
6. Higher order thinking often involves uncertainty. Not everything that bears on the task at hand is known.
7. Higher order thinking involves self-regulation of the thinking process.

8. Higher order thinking involves imposing meaning, finding structure in apparent disorder.
9. Higher order thinking is effortful. There is considerable mental work involved in the kinds of elaborations and judgments required.

These features point to the overlaps between scholars' interpretations of the term across disciplinary differences.

Because this thesis emphasizes the Socratic Learning Method as a learning approach that can be utilized by learners within the workplace, outside of the classroom, we will look into the 7<sup>th</sup> aspect of higher order thinking skills—the idea of metacognition, self-monitoring of the learning process—and relate it to the Socratic Learning Method and language learning and implementation in a professional context in this section.

### 3. Metacognition as a cause and effect of Socratic Method

In an informal context, and boiled down to the most simplistic explanation, metacognition can be described simply as thinking about thinking. Similar to higher order thinking, *metacognizing* is another pedagogical term that can be defined in a myriad of ways by scholars across disciplines, each definition subject to the nuances of one's own field, specialty, faculty, and subsequent training. It can mean thinking about thinking, learning to think, learning to study (L.B. Resnick 1987), learning how to learn, learning to learn, and learning about learning. The latter three interpretations, however, would be more appropriately labeled as meta-learning. D. Kuhn's definition of metacognition will be key in our analysis and application of Socratic inquiry and professional contexts: "cognition that reflects on, monitors, or regulates first-order cognition" (2008: 14).

Therefore, in the context of learning and the classroom, metacognition thus means monitoring the ongoing thinking or learning process. F. Lam on the necessity for Kuhn's definition of the practice of metacognition in the use of Socratic Method:

As students engage in Socratic Learning, they will "step outside" of their ongoing thinking process from time to time and check which stage of the Socratic Learning Method they are in, or which specific strategy in the Method they are using. Self-monitoring and engaging in metacognitive activity thus become steps superimposed on the four original steps of the Socratic Learning Method. This gives students a better sense of where they are in the learning process and learning oriented students are likely to pay more attention to this than performance oriented students (F. Lam 2011: 18.)

This proves an effective method for language learning, as it solidifies a base level confidence in language acquisition, and focuses not solely on, as F. Lam states, the "performance oriented student". But instead the synthesis of metacognition and the Socratic Method to fully motivate the student to pursue the idea of learning for learning's sake, a key component in the kind of self-motivation necessary to succeed in the workplace, especially in continued mastery of a language through the porous nature of business, technical, and professional vocabulary.

In the last decade, there has been a rise in the number of research studies examining how language teachers can motivate learners in a language classroom (M. Lamb, M. Weddell 2014)—especially by adopting methodologies which will continue to rep-

licate after a student leaves a school, classroom, or particular institution. However, in a recent review, Z. Dörnyei (1998: 133) points out that there is a critical difference between ‘motivating students’ and ‘developing their motivation’—that is, between getting learners to do what is necessary in class and inspiring them to invest effort in learning the language outside the classroom, in their own time, of their own volition, when the teacher no longer has any direct influence (M. Lamb, M. Weddell 2014). This point has a direct motivational correlation with the success of a language student once leaving an institution, and the ability of a student to continue to question, hypothesize, and ultimately succeed in a business environment.

One developing line of inquiry, however, is research on ‘motivational strategies’, which has grown out of Z. Dörnyei and K. Csizér’s (1998) pioneering study of Hungarian teachers’ beliefs about how to motivate their learners of English. Their list of ‘commandments’ for language teachers was elaborated by Z. Dörnyei into an extensive framework for motivational teaching practice, from ‘creating the basic motivational conditions’ through ‘generating initial motivation’ and ‘maintaining and protecting motivation’, to ‘encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation’. In recent years, this has been subjected to empirical validation from various angles. For example, M. Lamb and M. Weddell state:

A separate strand of research into motivational teaching has been based on Self Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Noels and colleagues (Noels et al. 1999, 2000) showed that adult learners’ perceptions of their teacher’s style affected their motivation; in line with the tenets of SDT, a more informative and less controlling style of language teaching tended to boost their sense of autonomy and competence. Subsequent research has demonstrated that various types of pedagogic intervention can enhance learners’ intrinsic motivation to learn language, including a ‘guided-autonomy’ syllabus (e.g. Fukuda et al., 2011), communicative teaching methodology (Pae & Shin, 2011) and stimulating learning tasks (Jones et al., 2009) in Japanese, Korean and US universities respectively (M. Lamb, M. Weddell 2014: 7).

This boost in a sense of autonomy and competence can only be enhanced by the use of the Socratic Method, which is predicated on free thought, inquiry and hypothesis. These are fundamental components not only in the acquisition of the English language, but also in structuring forward-thinking individuals able to contribute to and advance a free and democratic society (S. Canagrahah 2014). While previous approaches to international English described the communicative challenge in terms of grammar, the new approach presents it as a question of practice. In the emerging understanding, it is not our grammatical proficiency, but our adeptness in negotiating the diversity of grammars in each specific interaction that enables communicative success.

#### 4. Conclusion

S. Canagrahah (2014) implies that this move away from a focus on form is significant for many reasons. In the context of globalization, our interactions are becoming highly unpredictable. We interact with speakers from diverse backgrounds, with different languages, values, and proficiencies. It is difficult to go prepared for any interaction with a predictable set of grammatical norms. Previous models made our challenge easier by associating different countries and speakers with a specific English variety. It is



this variety which is sampled so often in the modern workplace, and in this general shift in communication patterns as well as the porous nature of language, which indicates that it is a necessity to incorporate different and varying modalities of language learning into classroom communication. Socratic Method not only posits the learner at the heart of their own learning experience, but also seeks to implicate their previous knowledge, gained knowledge and future acquisition in the composition of arguments and hypotheses. Socratic Method may be the singular most important device a student of language can be reliant on in order to prepare them for a competitive global marketplace where language can bend and shift at a moment, and where inquiry and innovation is never condemned, but consistently rewarded.

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