

Wisdom Begins in Wonder

By: Meriem BOULKROUN and Mohamed Tahar ASSESS

Introduction

In many language classrooms, students are assessed solely on the basis of their linguistic productions. However, this is not enough since schools are, and have always been, places where students are supposed to learn to think. The challenge is to teach students higher order thinking skills and to train them to think critically. Most educators would agree that their students are not as proficient at these kinds of thinking since textbooks and other teaching materials often consist of tasks that require low-level skills and ignore higher order thinking skills.

Over the years, educators such as Bloom (1956) and Gardner (1983) have worked on the development of a simple, practical framework to help teachers be more effective and systematic in teaching their students how to think by proposing various ways to describe the components of thinking. Those frameworks changed the way teachers taught and assessed students. Nowadays, educators shifted concern from performance-oriented goals to learning-oriented goals.

To develop the skills and strategies necessary for deep and careful thinking, students must be engaged in tasks that require critical thinking and problem solving. Socratic questioning provides a good method to enhance learners' critical thinking.

Definition of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking became part of the syllabus during the last decade of the twentieth century (Thadphothon7). It is defined as “reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis 10). Hence, critical thinking is all about decision making. It is the ability to communicate one's and/or others' ideas, argue for them, and ultimately take decisions. The latter are reflected in the change in one's opinions, attitudes, and behaviours. Though some educators question the teachability of critical thinking, others maintain that like higher order thinking, “critical thinking is a learned skill that requires instruction and practice” (Snyder & Snyder 1).

Socratic Pedagogy

Socratic pedagogy is a truth-seeking enterprise based on Socratic questioning. Socratic questioning is an “innovative and powerful instructional device” (Golden vii) developed by one of the greatest educators the world has known. Though it is derived from an old teaching method, it has proved its efficacy in the modern classroom. In simple terms, it is disciplined and systematic questioning based on the idea of asking focused and direct questions in order to force the other to question/support his assertions.

The Socratic Method

Asking good questions that promote thoughtful and relevant responses is the heart of the Socratic Method. It is based on the practice of disciplined, rigorously thoughtful dialogue. Through a thoughtful examination of ideas and issues in any discipline, students learn how to think critically (Rudd 19).

In the Socratic Method, the teacher pretends to know so little in order to draw students into a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion. The role of the teacher, then, is not to provide the correct answer but rather to guide the discussion. The teacher therefore needs to:

*examine a claim or an assumption by asking a question about a concept, idea, or an issue.

*understand first through asking students to clarify and explain the claim by using precise language.

*offer a counterexample in order to make students reflect on their own assumptions.

*repeat and relate to the initial claim by using visual aids such as mapping and diagramming in order to show the link between the different arguments offered.

*be patient and accept when the discussion ends even when there is no final resolution.

Following the role the teacher plays and considering the overall aim of Socratic questioning, it becomes obvious that Socratic learning is a constructivist method of four steps:

1. Eliciting relevant pre-conceptions
2. Clarifying pre-conceptions
3. Testing one's own hypotheses
4. Deciding to accept or not.

Constructivism vs. Instructivism

The instructionist approach, as its name suggests, favours giving direct and explicit instructions to students rather than having students explore on their own. It comes from John Locke's idea of Tabula Rasa which suggests that the human brain is born blank, void of ideas and that the only way to gain knowledge is through senses and experiences. According to this approach, the role of the teacher consists of filling the minds of learners.

The constructivists, on the other hand, disapprove of that idea. For them, learners come already equipped with prior knowledge, skills, and beliefs that influence what they notice and how they organise and interpret the environment. For them, knowledge must be constructed from or built upon the already existing knowledge.

During the so called Socratic dialogues, Socrates confronts interlocutors and reveals to them the faulted assumptions. He corrects misconceptions and builds new ideas on already existing knowledge. Therefore, the Socratic Method is classified as a constructionist one.

The aim of Socratic questioning

Socrates is known to be the father of Western philosophy; his dialogues provide evidence that questioning could be an innovative teaching tool. Socratic questioning aims not to change people's minds but to guide discovery. When people know the answer to a question, they try to change minds and make others think like them. However, when they do not know the answer, they just guide the discovery. That is why, pretending not to know is crucial in Socratic questioning. Socratic questioning, if well applied, not only helps in fixing problems but also teaches ways of finding solutions.

Types of Socratic Questions

Socratic questioning involves asking questions that:

- *students know the answer to.
- *draw students' attention to arguments they may know but have not reflected upon.
- *move from the concrete to the abstract.
- *push the students to apply the information to re-evaluate previous conclusions or construct a new idea.

The Aim of Socratic questions, then, is to challenge accuracy and completeness of thinking. Questions deemed Socratic are classified into:

1. Conceptual clarification questions: where the aim is to make learners clearly state their concepts (tell me more).
2. Probing assumptions: this kind pushes learners to explore other assumptions related to the original one (what else could we assume?).
3. Probing rationale, reason, and evidence: here, questions are meant to drag learners into the reasons that lie behind their assumptions (arguments).
4. Questioning viewpoints and perspectives: the teacher makes use of counterarguments to question learners' assumption. The point is to make learners doubt their assumptions and hence either correct them or look for alternatives.
5. Probe implications and consequences: because it is not enough to know, learners need to apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills in different contexts.
6. Questions about the question

Benefits of Socratic questioning

Socratic questioning has proved its efficacy as it laid the foundation for Western philosophy. It has also proved its merits in pedagogy and education. The benefits of Socratic questioning are numerous; the following are some of them.

- It helps students to think critically by explicitly focusing on the process of thinking (reflective thinking)
- It models scientific practices of inquiry.
- It supports active, student-centred learning.
- It facilitates inquiry-based learning; its aim is to explore ideas in depth.
- It helps students to conduct knowledge.
- It helps students to develop problem solving skills.
- It improves long-term retention of knowledge.

In other words, Socratic questioning is effective because:

- *it promotes active learning (focuses on what students are doing).
- *takes the pressure off the teacher (the teacher does not have all the answers. Since it is based on 'acting dumb', the teacher professes ignorance of the topic to engage in dialogues with the students).
- *generates skilled communicators as learners work on their communicative competence while working on their thinking skills.
- *develops critical attitudes towards knowledge

How does Socratic questioning work?

Since Socratic questioning aims to examine ideas logically and to determine the validity of those ideas, it pushes learners to question their own assumptions. It may be used by all teachers at different points within a unit or project. In order to make the most of it, teachers need to:

- *plan significant questions: since not all questions are equally beneficial.
- *use waiting time: in order to allow students to reflect on their thoughts.
- *follow on students' responses.
- *ask probing questions.
- *push students to re-evaluate what has been said by asking them to summarise the debate in writing for example.
- *draw as many students as possible to the discussion
- *let students discover knowledge on their own instead of giving them the answers.

Teachers can make sure they follow all these directions by responding to each question with a question, seeking the origin of the assumption and following the implications, and finally treating all thoughts as in need of development.

The relationship between CT and Socratic pedagogy

When learners engage in discussions, one can judge their communicative competence, but nothing guarantees that they are also engaged in systematic thinking. The Socratic Method, when well adopted, can assure the promotion of critical thinking.

Socratic pedagogy promotes independent thinking in students, and gives them ownership of what they are learning. By so doing, it helps students to monitor their own learning. Also, when it reduces the impact of misconception and aids students in organising knowledge, it cultivates higher order thinking skills.

A checklist for Socratic questions

Not all questions asked by the teacher will lead to the development of learners' critical thinking. Questions that call for one correct answer are generally not deemed good Socratic questions. Teachers may use the following checklist in order to make sure their practices inside the classroom abide by Socratic pedagogy.

- *did the teacher respond to all answers with a further question?
- *did the teacher make the goal of the discussion clear?
- *did the teacher pursue relevant information?
- *did the teacher question inferences, interpretations, and conclusions?
- *did the teacher focus on key ideas or concepts?
- *did the teacher note questionable assumptions?
- *did the teacher question implications and consequences?
- *did the teacher call attention to the point of view inherent in various answers?
- *did the teacher keep the central question in focus?
- *did the teacher call for a clarification of context, when necessary?
- *did the teacher distinguish subjective questions from factual questions from those requiring reasoned judgement within conflicting viewpoints?
- *did the teacher keep the participants aware of alternative ways to think about a problem?
- *did the teacher call for clarification when necessary?
- *did the teacher call for more details or greater precision when necessary?
- *did the teacher keep students aware of the need to stick to the question on the floor; to make sure their answers were relevant to the question being addressed at any given point?

*did the teacher keep students aware of the complexities in the question on the floor?
Did he ask students to think deeply about deep issues?

The Socratic Professor

Socratic questioning is not teaching in the conventional sense of the word. In the Socratic Method, there are no lectures, nor rote memorisation. The classroom experience is rather a shared dialogue between teacher and students; they both push the dialogue forward. The teacher is both a participant and a guide of the discussion where the inquiry is open-ended. The role of the teachers during debates is thus very much one of facilitator, and rarely one of answer-provider. All the teacher has to do is to select tasks, set them up, and then chair the discussion.

Pedagogical Implications

In any language classroom, the aim is to make learners practice the language. The most natural and effective way for learners to practice talking freely in English is by thinking out some problem or situation together through verbal interchange of ideas; or in simpler terms, to discuss. Discussions range from the simple question-answer process to the exploration of situations using role-play till reaching the complex political and philosophical debates. (Ur 02). The aim of discussions is efficient fluency practice; in other words, language is a means to an end. The thing is: we cannot expect good use of the means if we do not set a well-defined achievable goal. The purpose of discussions, whether it is solving a problem, exploring the implications of an idea, or constructing proposals has to be set at the beginning of the course. If learners use the language properly, then their thinking skills are improving for “language use implies thought; and a task involving talking must also involve thinking out” (Ur 13). By implementing discussions based on Socratic questioning, we enhance clear, logical thought on the one hand and communicative competence on the other.

Conclusion

With the development the world has known, there is an urgent need to teach thinking skills at all levels of education (Carr: 25). When it comes to teaching students to think, teachers face two big challenges. The first is to provide students with instruction and practice in the right kinds of skills. The second is to persuade and inspire them to use those skills appropriately in school and in their daily lives. Socratic pedagogy seems to do both by focusing not on the answers provided by students but on the questions asked instead. Questions express problems and delineate issues while answers often signal a full stop in thought. Only when an answer generates a further question does thought continue its life as such. We must continually remind ourselves that thinking begins in wonder. We need to make Socratic learning a mental habit in students to render them autonomous and independent thinkers.

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