

EFL UNDERGRADUATES' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE SOCRATIC SEMINAR TO BUILD ACTIVE STUDENT-LED ENGLISH DISCUSSION

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Abstract: The focal point of teaching and learning has shifted from the features of talking to the understanding of the talking process. This case study aimed to investigate attitudes toward Socratic Seminar in student-led discussions in the classroom. Twenty-one of the first year EFL undergraduate students majoring in English language teaching in a Thai university participated in the dialogues. This contemporary method involved an active discussion as an instructional tool to improve learning and comprehension of text in order to examine insights in the context of a ten-week Advanced Listening and Speaking course. This study followed qualitative design and contributed to students' attitudes from interacting with their peers and teacher, using supporting opinions and arguments to gain new perspectives. The data collection involved three Socratic Seminar observations and pre and post group interviews. The analysis showed that students had positive attitudes to this method. Discussions undertaken by the students resulted in significantly better performance when students were engaged in quality critical exchanges about the assigned text.

Keywords: Discussion, EFL, socratic seminar, undergraduate

1. Introduction

In traditional classroom at a Thai university, EFL students take on a more passive role in the classroom favoring collectivism, which is highly dominant in Asian contexts (Lochland, 2013; Cook, 2001). Teachers' direct discussions commonly dominate in the classroom. As a result, students are neither involved in an active discussion nor engaged in student-centered task. EFL students lack confidence in speaking and opportunities to practice listening simultaneously in classroom (Noom-ura, 2013). Thai university students become more dependent learners in mixed-ability English language classes. On the other hand, in a Socratic Seminar, students sit in a circle, which allows eye contact as teachers and students are on the same level. Therefore, students are allowed to have ownership of the seminar and are more likely to actively initiate meaningful responses (Canady & Retting, 1996).

2. Literature review

2.1. Improving English language learning in classroom

One of the most difficult aspects of learning English as a foreign language is developing the ability to sustain an active discussion in the classroom. Relying on lecture-based instruction is not effective due to the short attention span of human beings. Students' attention decreases dramatically after 10 minutes of lecture listening. Varying instruction methods help increase student attention and improve their retention of information (Svinicki & MacKeachie, 2011). A variety of individual, pair, or group work activities to keep students active is essential for

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fostering thinking, learning, problem-solving, comprehension or literary appreciation. Discussions implemented in the classroom add many options: sharing time, content lessons or even interaction in class. Discussions play important roles in developing logical thinking (Conhen et al., 2010). The individuals arrive at new understandings through collaborative construction of meaning.

2.2. The Socratic Seminar

The Socratic Seminar is also known as a ‘Socratic Circle’. The application of the method was initiated by Socrates, who was a classical Greek philosopher, and a founder of modern western philosophy. This form of discussion has been implemented for encouraging student response and motivating deeper inquiry into the concept (Moeller & Moeller, 2013). A variety of questions prompt students to participate in a robust discussion. Students need to develop explanation and questioning skills to be an effective member in this type of discussion (Walsh & Sattes, 2017).

2.3. Socratic seminar and active learning

Learning is associated with social interaction and this association has become widely accepted in the field of second language acquisition. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1986) indicated knowledge is constructed predominately through social interaction with others, for example, a teacher or a learner's peers. The Socratic Seminar is considered as an exciting and effective strategy for primary, secondary, and university students for its ability to provoke deeper and more meaningful English language learning. In this model, students are seated in a circle and engage in thoughtful dialogue by actively asking open ended questions (Brown & Lee, 2015). The students also are responsible for talking to each other and the teacher facilitates and moderates through questions.

Active learning is used interchangeably with ‘collaborative learning’, ‘cooperative learning’ and ‘hands-on learning’ (Blaz, 2018). Active learning consists of 4 basic elements: talking and listening, writing, reading, and reflecting. The Socratic Seminar is implemented by groups engaging in active learning through discussion in class to promote higher order thinking followed by a period of reflection.

2.4. The Socratic method of discussion

The Socratic method is an exercise of reflective thinking providing a scaffold approach. This method is composed of doubt and searching. ‘Doubt’ is related to an issue of the meaning which results in a process of ‘searching’ for a solution through discussion with increasingly complex thoughts (Ellis, 2012). Ball and Brewer (2000) stated that Socratic Seminar promotes learning facilitated by the “absence of fear, risk and judgment” (p.11). This challenging process guides the learner by innovative approaches to exploring a text and supporting their opinions with contextual evidence.

The main purpose is to increase the group's understanding of reading a text which results in enjoyment. Two specific types of question are utilized: pre-prepared and spontaneous follow-up questions. The pre-prepared question is normally on the problem and interpretation whereas

the spontaneous question leads to the development of the idea being considered with a view of resolution (Croninger et al., 2018).

The Socratic Seminar results in retention by the insights that emerge according to the learning pyramid. Retention studies point out the relatively low return on the passive reading or listening to lecture compared to the relatively high retention (50-90%) when students are engaged in the group discussions. Critical thinking is infused in the classroom as students learn to probe, to evaluate evidence, to write papers with well-structured arguments (Elder & Paul, 1998).

More importantly, the Socratic Seminar influences shared learning by activating the concepts of community, connection and communication. The Socratic Seminar also develops appreciation of higher form of truth that holds potential rather than a simple review of tests and assignments in a classroom (Trepanier, 2018).

Despite its positive effects, Copeland (2005) argued the Socratic Seminar is not suitable for teaching content knowledge in daily basis as it focuses on a higher level of understanding by making connections and drawing comparisons. The quality of dialogue can be deteriorated if students are underprepared as they have a tendency to assert their opinions rather than focus on comprehension based on the text.

The successful dialogues require students to study their reading texts and generate potential questions in the process. However, the students have a tendency to lose their interests in the topic because the topic selection can be preferred as whole class basis regardless the personal interests (Boghossian, 2006). The dialogue process will be effective on the condition that students exercise their equal relationship between their verbal techniques and critical thinking (Altorf, 2016). In terms of inclusive classroom, having teachers who are not speaking the same language can be difficult to facilitate a seminar as the social interaction pattern and participation can lead to confusion for students.

2.5. Implementation of the Socratic Seminar

To facilitate a successful discussion, students should take a major role. Those in the inner circle of students hold the discussion while the outer circle monitors the discussion and write comments and suggestions for their parts. Teacher steps aside and permits them to make the discussion happen. Students in the outer circle share the observations and comments with their partner.

Burns & Richards (2018) indicated that “ample exposure to another language without social engagement, interactivity or the negotiation of forms and meanings is, for most learners, inadequate if they wish to become proficient, communicatively competent users and especially speakers of another language” (p.102). The Socratic Seminar challenges students and works best with authentic and controversial texts. Three to five questions are asked depending on the length of time available.

The questions should be inviting and provoking inquiry and arranged in logical order to activate higher level of thinking. Teachers may ask the first question and tell students about the reading for thirty minutes, then call someone to volunteer an answer. After that, the teacher may

ask students to note where the response is located in the reading. Next, the teacher may ask probing questions to encourage deeper thinking then facilitate the discussion making sure everyone participates. Finally, the time at the end of the class may be used to summarize main points.

2.6. Socratic Seminar in today's university

Undergraduate students are required to develop critical and creative thinking skills in so that they acquire transferrable skills of both oral and written communication. Due to demand for employ ability skills, it is important to create a job seeking mentality which can contribute to the economy, providing more than a university degree for more lucrative employment.

Seminar learning process is influenced by four factors: teacher performance, seminar content, student preparation, and opportunities for interaction within seminars. The Socratic Seminar not only promotes self-examination but also helps students recognize the importance of democracy supported by the active use of realism through social interaction (Spruijt et al., 2015). Students acquire the tolerance of different points of view while being able to judge the universal value of their opinions.

2.7. Objective

This case study focused on EFL undergraduate students' attitudes towards the Socratic Seminar and its ability to build active student-led English discussion.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The case study participants included Thai EFL students enrolled in English Language Teaching Program, in a course entitled Advanced Listening and Speaking. The course required the students to attain knowledge about listening and speaking skills in academic contexts (6 hours/week). The sample was the entire class taking a ten-week course in the second semester. Twenty-one students involved in the study were undergraduate aged between 18-20 years in their first year at a Thai university. All of the students have been studying English at least eight years and considered a high beginner at B1 level according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

3.2. Research design

The case study design was used to explore the necessary data based on audio recordings and teacher's observation from English major students in the Socratic Seminar (Creswell, 2014). Spradley's ethnographic approach (1979) was employed to collect data from the research questions addressed. The pre and post semi-structured interviews and teacher's observation in the classroom were conducted to obtain the required qualitative data.

3.3. The Socratic Seminar design

The purpose of this study was to investigate EFL undergraduate students' experience when engaged in the Socratic Seminar. The Seminar strategy was based on textual analysis. Twenty-one first year undergraduate students participated in three Socratic Seminars throughout

the semester on the assigned topics. The group interviews were conducted at the beginning and end of the semester. Students were arrayed in two inner and outer circles for forty-five minute discussion. The inner circle discussed the text, while the outer circle observed the interactions, mannerisms, and contributions of their peers. These two layers enabled students in outer circle to contribute to discussions, then move back to the original position from the inner circle.

At the preliminary stage, teacher selected text in order to provide ample avenues for students' discussion. Next, the teacher explained norms explicitly and assigned a discussion leader who generated open-ended questions for clarification, probing questions and viewpoints (Paul & Elder, 2006). Before beginning the seminar, students were required to prepare ideas according to prompt questions such as 'Where does that idea come from in the text?', 'What does this word or phrase mean?', 'What do you think the author is trying to say?', 'What else could that mean?', 'Who was the audience for this text?', 'How does that shape our interpretation?'.

It was necessary that students were aware of the norms to structure the seminar. Using stems provided to express their ideas, for instance, point of view, agree/disagree, clarification, supporting questions supported students to pose questions and argue with each other. Students were involved in the process of collaborative thinking and were able to direct their own academic exploration. After reflection, students concluded by giving feedback to their friends. Peer evaluation was for inner participants to assess an observable behavior. Then, students were given the opportunity to evaluate the process in general and their own performance specifically. Finally, reflecting on the seminar process helped students improve their ability to participate in future discussions.

3.4. Research instruments

Group Interviews

At the beginning and the end of semester, the twenty-one students were divided into two groups. Each group of students conducted semi-structured interviews to explore their attitude toward the Socratic Seminar. Seven open ended questions to be asked were as follows:

- What was your experience in learning prior to the Socratic Seminar?
- What happened to you during the seminar?
- What are the differences between traditional classroom discussion and the Socratic Seminar?
- How were you engaged in the Socratic Seminar?
- How did seminar help you to understand the text better?
- What did you notice about your own and your classmate's behavior during the seminar?
- How did the Socratic Seminar make you change your opinions?

Teacher's Observation Notes

The classroom observation covered important aspects of the method. After the Socratic Seminars, observation notes were recorded on particular issues of classroom atmosphere, students' behaviors, their participation and interaction with peer as well as between students and teachers.

4. Results

Group Interviews

The Socratic Seminar produced positive effects on thinking during the process in three additional areas: preparation for the seminar, search for contextual evidence and recognition of relevance and connection of the text to the student's experience. Listening and speaking participants to raise questions and gave them responsibility to explore new issues in class.

Based on group interviews, successful seminar seminars allowed for the following:

Setting the norm of an active classroom community

The Socratic Seminar shaped students, patterns of behavior as well as ways of learning and thinking. Students were encouraged to think, talk and discuss the topics by using substantive dialogues. They built associations via cognitive ability from listening attentively. Participating in the seminars created better understanding of the content, exchanging thoughts and accepting new ideas. To investigate new ideas actively, students were required to practice speech, take notes and argue to generate in-depth analysis from their perspectives. This was unlike the traditional classroom where participation was not highly valued due to feelings of embarrassment from disapproving claims, making mistakes, criticisms of imperfect answers and feeling incompetent from being a non-native English speaker.

Develop classroom environment promoting social and emotional group responsibility

The Socratic Seminar assisted students to achieve communicative goals of learning. This method offered significant opportunity to engage in high quality talk and verbalize their understanding. Students refined their talk and responded to the challenging questions with peers both in interactive and unidirectional contexts. Learning became a conscious process of accumulating knowledge. The process allowed participants to transform their learning behaviors by dealing with a topic in a friendly learning environment. Creating a classroom environment that closely aligned with the real world fostered learning with and from teachers revealing the importance of contribution to expand thinking.

Students are engaged in collaborative team learning

Group work presented students with a way in reaching their personal development and to work on problem solving. Students found their new discoveries led to insight. They did not only confirm their existing knowledge but also uncovered something that was significant or overlooked before. While delivering their speech, students navigated strategically, by organizing and prioritizing their thinking. Referring to the reading text, they nurtured deeper thinking from returning to the text to support the answers. With the evidence from text focus, readiness in reading was also cultivated.

Developing question and discussion skills

Open ended-questions helped to reveal what students had learned. Well-designed questions led to new insight that prompted substantive peer to peer discussion and to promote deeper exploration of subject matter. Students framed responses that resulted in questions becoming the tools to access and activate prior knowledge of concepts. A consequence of this was the focus on academic English vocabulary to express ideas and themes to enhance readiness in listening and speaking from peer feedbacks. During their preparation process, they were motivated to keep up to date to brainstorm and organize ideas using language of persuasion. This method allowed time and keep the discussion open to give opportunities to express more in-depth details.

Helping self-directed learning

The Socratic Seminar empowered students to be the owner of their learning and to develop skill sets that society demands. This method allowed students to demonstrate reflective and conceptual learning in authentic ways. Students felt that they were empowered from developing their ownership of thinking. Continuing conversations generated purposeful and meaningful opportunities of listening and speaking practice in English resulting in awareness to create and organize meaning for themselves. Self-awareness is cultivated during the seminar from putting ideas into words and gestures; taking turn; choosing disagreement language and staying focused.

Teacher's observation notes

The Socratic Seminar encouraged greater classroom dialogue. According to teacher observation in class, it normally took a few minutes for students to warm up. At the initial stage, students were reluctant and not engaged in the discussion from non-verbal clues showing confusion and boredom. They randomly came up with generic ideas and hardly took a position. However, neither all students participated in continuing talk nor using the probing questions. This method involved teacher's choice of text and participation structure. Specific rules were enforced. Once students appeared to follow the established norms of asking questions, simultaneous questions were appropriately responded without disruptions. Students reasonably agreed/disagreed and anticipated major theme of the texts from preparation. They were also given time to respond to questions and proposed ideas within their groups. Teacher minimized her leadership role to direct the discussion. Students significantly learned to project their voice as well as emphasize and highlight some important ideas simultaneously with more confidence and enthusiasm. Participating students took the lead in classroom talk and produce knowledge. Unfamiliar terms were defined when needed. Ideas were expressed to clarify unfamiliar concepts. Humor was used to strengthen interests and to make students eager to ask questions. Students were more specific on their feedback to their friends. When controversial topics were presented, students stayed motivated and shared turns at talking. Students were more familiar with assuming roles during the talk. Critical comments were posed to help develop their classmates listening and speaking ability. As a result, students independently articulated speech and gesture to convey the meaning of talk.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate EFL student attitudes toward the Socratic Seminar to build active student-led English discussion. According to the findings, most students had a positive response in the development of their oral skills. The results revealed the significant changes in learning behaviors. This method provided for more student turns and responsibility to the talk (Juzwik et al., 2013). Interactions were more visible while students dug deep into the provided information for discussions. Reflections after the sessions assisted students to gain awareness of what they gained from the content and be more prepared through their learning process (Macaro et al., 2017). Collaboration amongst the students encouraged higher level of thinking and promoted both autonomy and teamwork.

The Socratic Seminar involved dialogue with both students and instructors. The dialogues were centered on open ended questions about an assigned text. This technique promoted the use of critical thought, dialogue, and ownership of the discussion in ways that enhanced English language learning. Students were active language learners in the Socratic Seminar. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that: “A word is a microcosm of human consciousness” (p.255). Thought and language could not exist independently and for learners, they must articulate and connect thoughts in a conscious way. The Socratic Seminar in a classroom setting fundamentally engaged EFL undergraduate students. Its dynamic process generated new ideas from challenging tasks seeking reasonable and logical explanation (Polite & Adams, 1997).

The Socratic Seminar cannot be implemented without challenges. Students encountered two challenges as non-native English language speakers. Speaking can be taught in combination with linguistic knowledge and communication strategies (Goh & Burns, 2012). Practicing integrated skills involved interaction with these two domains. First, linguistic knowledge can be defined as knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of the target language: efficiency and accuracy in the lower level process of speech segmentation, word recognition and phonological coding. Second, strategic behavior to assist with making meaningful understanding of a concept is the knowledge in prompting another to support their ideas by claiming the contextual evidence.

The Socratic Seminar provided cognitive scaffolding to students. Students were motivated to produce language and prepare for linguistic readiness. This method exercised reflective thinking. Based on the data collection, students confirmed this method increased their motivation and attention. Willingness to communicate can be affected by interactional patterns, interlocutors task types and topics (Cao, 2011). Thai students were frequently engaged in group activities rather than in individual ones, by interacting more spontaneously in the target language (Burner et al., 2014). Using dialogic exchange during the sessions transformed their ways of thinking and understanding in the social contexts. In addition, the Socratic Seminar allowed students to hide when they are not in the mood to perform. Anxiety can stimulate energy and emotion (Aida, 1994). This method reduced the stress and negative anxiety on students by lessening pressure on them to monitor their progress and to perform adequately in front of their peers.

Some students might feel anxious, unprepared and unable to participate due to the low English proficiency. In some cases, students relied on instructor's facilitation skills to get a high level of engagement. The English educational setting framed their narrative and discussion. In order to develop students' language abilities, they were required to develop boarder and more proficient combination of strategies (Christenbuey & Kelly, 1983). Students were engaged in questioning and prompts to enable and lead them to develop enquiry mindset. Nevertheless, this method didn't guarantee students' engagement based on the topic of interest alone. Students tended to be satisfied with a mixture of lecturing and active learning which is not monolithic.

Learning is a social process. This social constructivist method depended on student's existing knowledge and willingness to participate (Marlowe & Page, 2005). Learning conceptions influence their ability to learn and their level of resistance to change in the instruction (Dunbar et al, 2007). Collaboration provides specific responsibilities related to completion of task and improves engagement. Listening and reading in the English language provided learners with additional linguistic input and it also opened the door to the wealth of information. Students' group activities created active conditions their level of resistance to change in. They requested a direct answer when they had conflict cases. Students spent time training to ensure active learning of the disciplines or fields of knowledge for which they were encouraged to express their opinions.

6. Implications and conclusion

This method was suggested to use in English language instruction for discussions in the condition that clear and concise procedures are introduced using the model of collaborative work. Thoughtful questions were developed prior to the discussions adapting the reflective dialogues so that learners could become more critical thinkers. Teachers encourage students' abilities to perform as students might have more difficulty distinguishing the core content in order to convey clear and relevant contributions to the seminar. At the initial stage, students were reluctant to proceed and need assistance from teachers in directing and leading the seminar. However, when they feel more comfortable with the process for conducting the seminar, they voluntarily lead and perform. Good note taking skills with effective attentive and analytical skills are required.

The knowledge gained from this study could benefit the field of higher education by clarifying whether the Socratic Seminar is an effective teaching method for EFL undergraduate students. Additionally, this method is not based on how well students have done and what could be done to achieve a higher mark. Future research can be extended in different majors to find out the direct influence for effective English language development. Due to the short time frame, the study collected data in a ten-week period. However, more data can be collected over a longer period to gain more information form listening and speaking skills.

Effective and purposeful discussion happen in traditional classroom because teachers may believe it is time-consuming. Reflective dialogues can be designed to help students to discuss meaningful issues using complex academic language demonstrating what they have learned. Students sharpen their ability to build knowledge to answer question and construct the meaning from small group discussion. Skillful learners are adept at self-assessment and they are able to

reflect a complete understanding of the university teaching approach. Discussions are challenging the existing belief that teachers may avoid confronting unexpected outcomes. Learning happens when learner behaviors change to become more self-directed. Ensuring argumentation skills should prepare students to meet the critical thinking demand influencing students' belief about knowledge. Thinking skills are enhanced through explicit and systematic pedagogical practices.

Lecture combined with discussion is essential for teaching language skills, for instance comprehending and critical thinking. Students were offered authority and control over their own learning with minimal guidance. Students were truly engaged with their own learning and also allowed to have some input into the way they learn instead of wasting their time on unimportant details and inaccurate information and participating in a task that they did not understand. Learning curiosity was initiated to maintain interest and speak with enthusiasm. The discussion contents were well-organized, unfolded logically and proceeded at comfortable pace. Students developed their skills in well-defined and logical structures resulting in deep learning and higher order thinking skills.

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THÁI ĐỘ CỦA SINH VIÊN TIẾNG ANH (EFL) ĐỐI VỚI HÌNH THỨC THẢO LUẬN SOCRATIC ĐỂ XÂY DỰNG HOẠT ĐỘNG THẢO LUẬN TIẾNG ANH TÍCH CỰC DO SINH VIÊN CHỦ TRÌ

Tóm tắt: Trọng tâm của việc dạy và học đã chuyển từ các đặc điểm của việc Nói sang sự hiểu biết về quá trình Nói. Một nghiên cứu trường hợp nhằm điều tra thái độ đối với hình thức thảo luận Socratic trong các hoạt động thảo luận do sinh viên chủ trì trên lớp học. 21 sinh viên năm nhất ngành EFL, chuyên ngành về Giảng dạy Tiếng Anh tại một Trường Đại học Thái Lan đã tham gia vào các cuộc đối thoại. Phương pháp hiện đại này bao gồm việc sử dụng một cuộc thảo luận chủ động như một công cụ hướng dẫn để cải thiện việc học và hiểu văn bản nhằm kiểm tra những hiểu biết sâu về nội dung của khóa học mười tuần về Nghe và Nói nâng cao. Nghiên cứu này tuân theo thiết kế định tính và góp phần vào thái độ học sinh thông qua việc tương tác với các bạn học và giáo viên, sử dụng các ý kiến và lập luận hỗ trợ để có được những quan điểm mới. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua việc quan sát ba cuộc thảo luận theo hình thức Socratic và phỏng vấn nhóm trước và sau hoạt động. Phân tích cho thấy sinh viên có thái độ tích cực đối với phương pháp này. Các cuộc thảo luận được thực hiện bởi các sinh viên cho kết quả hiệu suất tốt hơn đáng kể khi sinh viên tham gia vào các cuộc trao đổi phân biện có chất lượng về văn bản được giao.

Từ khóa: Thảo luận, EFL, thảo luận Socratic, sinh viên