

## ŠIUOLAIKINIO MOKYMO KAITOS PROBLEMAS

### The Socratic Method in a Foreign Language Classroom

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*The article considers the use of Socratic Dialogue when it is applied in teaching English for specific purposes. It looks into the functioning of Socratic method in the English language classroom for Law and Public Administration students. The investigation employs a two-fold techniques. On the one hand, the emphasis is laid on the self-confidence in one's own thinking. Therefore, in the form of the Socratic Dialogue this method encourages students to reason and think independently and critically. On the other hand, the development of the thinking process calls for the use of a very specific vocabulary which fosters students to develop foreign language skills. Students have to master English for Law and English for Public Administration vocabulary as well as complicated syntactical and grammatical structures. The article also gives an account of a classroom discussion on a topic "What is autonomy?". Students assume that autonomy is a matter of internal personal experience rather than phenomenon which is perceived objectively in the world.*

**Key words:** Socratic method, Socratic Dialogue, critical thinking, questioning techniques, universal intellectual standards, consensus, dissensus.

#### Introduction

One of the present-day powerful teaching tactics for fostering critical thinking is the Socratic method. In the form of the Socratic Dialogue it is successfully used in a whole range of subjects and disciplines because of the shared strategy principles that encourage students to reflect and think independently and critically.

The Socratic Dialogue has long been used and researched as a teaching method in various foreign universities, especially in England, Germany and Netherlands. However, the

emphasis in using and researching this method has been laid purely on answering the question by seeking out the truth of the matter and reaching consensus, by engaging in the cooperative process and by deepening individual insights and understanding.

In Lithuania the Socratic Dialogue has not been used and researched much. Furthermore, the Socratic Dialogue has not been researched at all when applied in teaching English for specific purposes with reference to the aims, procedures, rules and criteria of its use. Therefore, it might be of great interest and value

to look at the Socratic Dialogue both as a method promoting critical thinking and reasoning and the method used in teaching a foreign language for professional use purposes.

Thus, the article goes into a detailed analysis of the Socratic Dialogue, which promotes rigorous inquiry and consensus, the key issues of any Socratic Dialogue, as well as teaches English for Law and Public Administration students. For this purpose a two-fold techniques is being employed in the present investigation. On the one hand, the emphasis is laid on the self-confidence in one's own thinking while searching for the truth in answer to a particular question. On the other hand, the development of the thinking process calls for the use of a very specific vocabulary and complicated syntactical and grammatical structures.

## Aim

It is the aim of this contribution to illustrate how the Socratic method supports the in-depth understanding of various issues concerning everyday life as well as feeds a student with adequate foreign language proficiency structures. For this aim the paper *firstly* deals with some theoretical aspects of the Socratic Dialogue use in the group of students and *secondly* presents a summary account of the English language for Public Administration students classroom discussion on the philosophical and ethical issue "What is autonomy?".

## Overview of some theoretical aspects of the Socratic Dialogue

As a tactics and approach, Socratic Dialogue is a highly disciplined process. First of all, a group of students participating in the discussion has to be managed by the teacher, the so-called facilitator. The contributions from the members of the class

are like so many thoughts in the mind, which may be similar as well as completely controversial. All of the thoughts must be dealt with and they must be dealt with carefully and fairly. Socratic researches agree that by following up all answers with further questions, and by selecting questions which advance the discussion, the Socratic facilitator forces the class to think in a disciplined, intellectually responsible manner (R. Saran and B. Neisser, 2004).

The following criteria can be identified which a teacher in a Socratic Dialogue should be guided by:

- keep the discussion focused,
- keep the discussion intellectually responsible,
- stimulate the discussion with adequate questions,
- periodically summarize what has and what has not been discussed,
- draw as many students as possible into the discussion (F. Leal and R. Saran, 2004).

At the basis of Socratic Dialogue lies the ability to use **Socratic questioning techniques** (R. Saran and B. Neisser, 2004). Any thought is developed as a result of different stimulating questions. In Socratic Dialogue certain categories of questions are identified. These include:

- 1) questions of clarification (*What do you mean by \_\_\_? How does \_\_\_ relate to \_\_\_? Could you explain that further? etc.*),
- 2) questions that probe assumptions (*What are you assuming? All of your reasoning depends on the idea that \_\_\_? Why have you based your reasoning on \_\_\_ rather than \_\_\_? etc.*),
- 3) questions that probe reasons and evidence (*What would be an example? Are these reasons adequate? Do you have any evidence for that? How does that apply to this case? etc.*),
- 4) questions about viewpoints or perspectives (*You seem to be approaching this issue from*

\_\_\_ perspective. Why have you chosen this rather than that perspective? How would other group/types of people respond? Why? What would influence them? etc.),

- 5) questions that probe implications and consequences (What are you implying by that? But if that happened, what else would happen as a result? Why? What effect would that have? etc.),
- 6) questions about the question (How can we find out? Is this the same issue as \_\_\_? What does this question assume? How would \_\_\_ put the issue? Would \_\_\_ put the question differently? Why is this question important? How could someone settle this question? etc.).

The questioning techniques makes the discussion structured and “the process of students thinking develops from the unclear to the clear, from the unreasoned to the reasoned, from the implicit to the explicit, from the unexamined to the examined, from the inconsistent to the consistent, from the unarticulated to the articulated” (R. Saran and B. Neisser, 2004, 137). The teacher has also to encourage the students to slow their thinking down, repeat the main statements and elaborate on them. The flipchart is employed where the main ideas are summarised, key vocabulary items listed and further steps in the development of the discussion are conceptualized.

Another typical feature of critical thinking is the application of **universal intellectual standards**. To think critically entails having command of these standards. To help students learn them, teachers should tailor questions which enforce students thinking, questions which hold students accountable for their thinking. The ultimate goal is to infuse the questioning techniques into the thinking of students and, thus, guide them to better reasoning. (P. Shipley and H. Mason, 2004).

There are quite a few of universal intellectual standards distinguished by most researchers into the Socratic Dialogue (F. Leal, 2004). The most significant among them are the following:

**Clarity:** *Could you elaborate further on that point? Could you express that point in another way? Could you give me an illustration? Could you give me an example?*

Clarity is the gateway standard. If a statement is unclear, it is impossible to determine whether it is accurate or relevant.

**Accuracy:** *Is that really true? How could we check that? How could we find out if that is true?* A statement can be clear but not accurate.

**Precision:** *Could you give more details? Could you be more specific?*

A statement can be both clear and accurate, but not precise.

**Relevance:** *How is that connected to the question? How does that bear on the issue?* A statement can be clear, accurate, and precise, but not relevant to the question at issue.

**Depth:** *How does your answer address the complexities in the question? How are you taking into account the problems in the question? Is that dealing with the most significant factors?* A statement can be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant, but superficial (that is, lack depth).

**Breadth:** *Do we need to consider another point of view? Is there another way to look at this question? What would this look like from a conservative standpoint? What would this look like from the point of view of \_\_\_?* A line of reasoning may be clear, accurate, precise, relevant, and deep, but lack breadth.

**Logic:** *Does this really make sense? Does that follow from what you said? How does that follow? But before you implied this and now you are saying that; how can both be true?* When we think, we bring a variety of thoughts together into some order. When the combination of thoughts is

mutually supporting, the thinking is “logical.” When the combination is not mutually supporting, is contradictory in some sense, or does not make sense, the thinking is “not logical.”

### **A summary account of the Socratic Dialogue in a group of university students**

As a rule every participant in a Socratic Dialogue comes to discover that no description can add to the experience and the learning at its best. With this thought in mind, it would be useful to present a brief outline on a Socratic dialogue held in a group of students of Public Administration at Law University of Lithuania.

The Socratic Dialogue was carried in autumn of 2004. The sample of the case-study was 23 students of Public Administration program at Law University of Lithuania. All participants were second-year third-term students, who have already been introduced to basic terminology and concepts in law and public administration and who have covered the general issues of law and public administration during their first-year of studies.

The aim of the Socratic Dialogue was to gain fundamental and general insights into a philosophical and ethical problem which addressed the question “**What is autonomy?**”

The starting point consisted of collecting real, individually experienced examples relating to the topic. One of these examples had to be chosen by the group and had to form the basis of the dialogue. Providing their examples students had to bear in mind the following rules, which were written down on the board.

Example should be:

- Drawn from our experience – not hypothetical
- Relevant to all participants

- Recognisable as a case of autonomy to all participants
- Finished – i. e. the experience has come to an end
- Not unduly complicated
- One where the example-giver is willing to provide additional information to the group so they can investigate it fully
- One which does not involve others present (or criminal acts!)

The most solid examples, which were produced by the students can be summarised into decisions to

- achieve independence in one’s own thinking,
- make choices which had previously not been made,
- not to be racist while living in a racist society.

Then the students had to brainstorm the vocabulary items and collocations that could contribute to the discussion. They were listed on the flipchart. The use of each of the vocabulary items had to be analysed, synonymous and antonymous words and expressions produced.

The discussion started and students first spoke in support of their preferences and in the discussion assumptions about autonomy emerged. For some students it applied only to cases that are central to a person’s life. For some, it involved confronting a dilemma. Other students believed that autonomy did not need to involve conflict at all. Therefore the group had some difficulties while choosing the example for Socratic Dialogue. And this difficulty was primarily related to the fact that the concept of autonomy is theory-laden and group members hence carried many conflicting assumptions about the concept. Firstly, students admitted that the concept of autonomy is rarely used in everyday speech. And when it is used it occurs perhaps most often in conversations where theoretical positions are at stake. The various

examples revealed this and consequently made choosing difficult. Students favoured or objected to examples on the grounds that they involved emotions, occurred in extreme situations, were central to the owner or involved life-changing decisions, involved dilemmas, struggles or complexity. Strong views on these aspects made systematic sorting and selection of the examples hard to achieve. Finally the students settled on the example to work with. It was the example which focused on the decision to make choices which had previously not been made.

The first stage of the discussion ended with vocabulary items consolidation exercises.

The next stage comprised questions from the group which aimed only at ensuring understanding, not on commenting, or expressing disagreement. The enquiry had to be governed by the set of ground rules:

- 1) Strive for consensus;
- 2) Postpone your (pre-)judgements;
- 3) Express yourself clearly and concisely;
- 4) Think for yourself (no appeals to authority);
- 5) Express your actual doubts but not hypothetical ones.

The students were asked to put questions concretely and ask only those needed to elicit the details required to decide whether or not autonomy was present in the example. The example-giver provided thorough answers to the questions asked. Eventually the student wrote his example in full on a flipchart to provide the group with a common document. The group continued to explore the example asking about the physical setting in which the decision was made, the existence of any negative factors, what was of value in life, and what would have happened if some circumstances had been different. The last question had to be ruled out because it was a hypothetical question and prohibited by the rules.

The third stage led the students into the elaborated discussion. Concepts such as ambition, duty and pressure emerged to clarify what was being discussed. This stage required each student to check if they could put themselves in the position of the example-giver and then make an intuitive judgement about the presence of autonomy. Two questions were distinguished: (1) *can you put yourself in the place of the example-giver?* and (2) *do you accept it as an example of autonomy?* While the group considered this, the student whose example was being discussed, formulated a core sentence to express precisely where he judged autonomy was present in his example. This core sentence included the following elements: the absence of external pressure, going against someone else's wishes and doing something which was of value to him. The students in their turn confirmed that they could put themselves in the place of the example-giver but not all were convinced the experience was of autonomy.

Having narrowed the concept of autonomy down to a core sentence the students agreed on the issue that they had to find the key principles concerning autonomy. The Dictionary reference prompted the question whether a decision can ever be autonomous. Some students suggested that autonomy could be present only if both sides of a conflict were fully and carefully considered before a decision was made. Other students pursued the thought that there are degrees of autonomy and that the example was not a clear-cut instance.

In the final stage the students tried to reach a consensus on the concept of autonomy. However, the difference of the arguments led to the difference of conceptual understanding. One group of students suggested that actions that contribute toward realising one's self entitle the person to be described as autonomous. Other

students forwarded the view that autonomy is a continuum, any point of which indicates the degree of autonomy. Still others felt this was too wide as it could include, for instance, love.

In the end it was suggested that these are different criteria of autonomy use but not a definition. The students had to agree on the decision that they had reached not a consensus but a dissensus on the issue of autonomy.

## Conclusions

- Socratic dialogue as practised today is a rigorous inquiry into a question and our own thinking about it, aiming to investigate our assumptions in a joint process. It seeks two things: shared insight and an answer to the question, possibly in the form of a consensus.
- Socratic questioning enhances students critical thinking in that it:
  - 1) raises basic issues,
  - 2) pursues problematic areas of thought,
  - 3) helps students discover the structure of their own thoughts,
  - 4) helps students develop sensitivity to clarity, accuracy, relevance,
  - 5) helps students arrive at judgment through their own reasoning.
- Clarity, accuracy, precision, depth, relevance, breadth and logic are the most significant universal intellectual standards which must be applied to thinking and students can learn to use them when they participate in the Socratic Dialogue.
- The students appeared to assume that autonomy was a matter of internal personal experience rather than a phenomenon capable of being perceived objectively in the world. They suggested that autonomy could be applied to either an action, a series of actions, a decision, the will, or the self.
- The students were concerned about reaching consensus in the question of autonomy. However, they had to agree on reaching dissensus.

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## SOKRATO METODO NAUDOJIMAS MOKANT UŽSIENIO KALBOS

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Sokrato metodo naudojimo galimybė mokant teisės ir viešo administravimo specialybių studentus anglų kalbos. Pabrėžiama, kad šis inovacinis metodas padeda studentams suvokti pateiktą informaciją užsienio kalba, prisiminti faktus ir įgyti bei

įtvirtinti kalbos raiškos įgūdžius (gramatinės ir sintaksinės struktūros, žodyno).

Sokrato dialogas – tai bandymas kartu su grupe rasti atsakymą į pateiktą klausimą, naudojant kritinį mąstymą. Siekiama dviejų dalykų: bendros išvalgos ir

klausimo suvokimo bei grindžiamo bendru supratimu atsakymo į pateiktą pagrindinį klausimą.

Sokrato dialogo taikymas apibūdinamas dvipusės technikos naudojimu. Pirmiausia pabrėžiamas pasitikėjimo reiškiant mintis ugdymas. Tai skatina studentus savarankiškai reikšti mintis ir kritiškai mąstyti. Kita vertus, minčių raiškai reikia tam tikro užsienio kalbos mokėjimo lygio. Tai verčia studentus mokytis anglų kalbos specialiesiems tikslams (teisinė anglų kalba ir anglų kalba viešam administravimui), taip pat sudėtingų sintaksės ir gramatikos konstrukcijų.

Sokrato dialoge ypač svarbus veiksnys yra tokie loginiai klausimų sudarymo principai: *aizkumas, tiks-*

*lumas, gilumas, tinkamumas, teisingumas, logiškumas* ir kt.

Straipsnyje taip pat pateikiama Sokrato dialogo praktinio atvejo analizė tema „Kas yra autonomiškumas“. Sokrato dialogo metu studentai susiaurina sąvokos „autonomiškumas“ reikšmę. Sutariama, kad būtina atsiboti nuo bendrų interpretacijų apibrėžiant pagrindinius „autonomiškumo“ principus. Nors vienas iš kertinių Sokrato dialogo principų yra tas, kad dalyviai diskutuojamu klausimu prieina prie bendros išvados, straipsnyje analizuojamo diskusijos klausimo atveju gaunamas priešingas rezultatas. Studentai suvokia, kad *autonomiškumo* klausimą galima interpretuoti įvairiais aspektais.

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