The Socratic trap: A strategic snare that EFL teachers should sidestep

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Abstract
Teachers use a variety of questions and feedback to facilitate communication in the classroom. One type of questioning strategy uses Socratic type questions to lead the students to a pre-formulated answer. Through examination of classroom discourse, this paper shows that in the EFL classroom, this type of questioning strategy may not be ideal for promoting communication.

教師はクラスでのコミュニケーションが円滑に行われる様に、様々な質問やフィードバックを使用する。その戦略の一つが、前もって処方された答えに学生を導くソクラテスの問答法である。本論では、クラス内ディスコースの調査を通して、EFLクラスではソクラテスの問答法がコミュニケーションを促進するのに理想的ではないかも知れないと述べている。

EFL teachers spend a great deal of time asking and answering questions in order to facilitate communication. Unfortunately, sometimes the way we ask or answer these questions only leads to frustration and confusion with the student. As conversation facilitators and teachers, it behooves us to better understand the dynamics of using questions and answers in our classrooms. This article focuses on the use of questions in the EFL context by applying the Socratic analysis method as outlined by Chaudron (1988) to classroom data gathered at a private English school in Japan. The hope is that readers could apply a similar analytical methodology to examine questioning strategies in their own classrooms.

Paraskevas and Wickens (2003) explain that "The Socratic method in adult education involves the use of systematic questions…the instructor systematically poses a series of pre-set questions…[And] these questions are designed to channel the learners' thought processes along predetermined paths" (p. 6).

Chaudron (1988) further clarifies that the Socratic method operates by asking questions in a formulaic fashion by shaping questions in the form of a choice, and following up student answers with deeper follow-up questions. Teachers can thus manipulate the conversation and lead their students to a pre-determined discovery of what they had wanted to teach in the first place. However, while this works well within science and technology education, it often leads to difficulty in the EFL context, where Socratic questioning can lead to a *Socratic trap*, when communication is hindered rather than helped. The Socratic trap refers to broad questions such as, "Why are

Japanese so interested in cell phones?" where the teacher has a pre-determined answer and tries to manipulate and guide students toward the answer the teacher is thinking of. Even as students try to answer, more questions are added, "Is it because they are convenient?" along with hints "You know, Lawson Convenience Store." Teachers stuck in the trap often continue to add more clues, and even worse, may dismiss student answers if they are different from the answer the teacher is trying to guide them towards. This can lead to confusion and settling for responses from students that don't exhibit their students' full potential. Rather than encouraging learning and meaningful communication, the interaction demotivates students and teachers alike.

One of the teacher's jobs is to provide an atmosphere that gives the students an opportunity to experience "using" the language. To maintain student interest and promote meaningful classroom English communication, a more rigorous questioning strategy may be useful. Through a case study, this article will investigate the effectiveness of questioning strategies in an EFL classroom. After introducing types of questions from the literature, transcripts from a lesson with young learners and an inexperienced teacher at a private English conversation school will be examined. Finally, an analysis of the apparent effectiveness of the lesson will lead to the claim that it may be wise to avoid Socratic questions in these classrooms. My hope is that other teachers may learn from the ethnographic exploration of the classroom discourse presented here and may be able to avoid falling into similar traps in their own classrooms.

An arsenal of questions

Before conducting the analysis of the classroom discourse, it is first necessary to outline the different questioning types as presented in the literature. Thus this section offers an overview of different question types and some discussion of their desirability in promoting communication in the language classroom.

The first question type to be discussed is display questions (Chaudron, 1988; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). These questions represent an attempt at meaningful communication or pseudo-communication, although the communicative value of this question type is dubious. A teacher using flash cards might use a display question such as, "What is it?" where the teacher already knows the answer. This kind of communication consists of an IRF pattern: *initiation* from the teacher (a question), a learner *response*, and teacher *feedback* (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Yet the value of these questions for authentic-sounding and seeming communication is minimal, as in all cases the teacher can only check student understanding of information the teacher already has access to, but not interact in a way similar to discourse outside the classroom.

Moving away from questions where the teacher already knows the answer, referential questions (Chaudron, 1988; Richards & Lockhart, 1996) usually require a "yes" or "no" response such as, "Did you go skiing this weekend?" where the teacher does not know the answer. Referential questions can encourage more natural-seeming discourse than display questions.

For the purposes of this article, it is worth considering two other types of questions, convergent (Richards & Lockhart, 1996) or closed (Chaudron, 1988) and divergent (Richards & Lockhart, 1996) or open-ended (Chaudron, 1988). Convergent questions elicit a yes, no, or short response, while divergent questions leave the nature of the response open and encourage higher-level thinking (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Language teachers often ask a rapid sequence of convergent questions to help develop aural skills and vocabulary and to encourage whole-class participation before moving on to some other technique.…For example, after asking the convergent questions …the teacher went on to ask divergent questions… (Richards & Lockhart 1996, pp. 186-187).

For example, "Did you go skiing this weekend?" might be followed by "How were the slopes?" and then by "How are the slopes compared to other ski areas?"

Another question type is non-retrieval imaginative questions, which do not require the learner to retrieve given information, but ask for an opinion or judgment (Wajnryb 1992). For example, "What do you think the author meant by this passage?" is such a question. The problem with this type of question is that although it can be effective for encouraging communication, asking one at the

outset of a class period with little preparation may confuse students.

Finally, confirmation checks (Chaudron, 1988) are frequently used questions in teacher-student-teacher response patterns to verify understanding as in S: Yesterday, I saw a hippopotamus! T: A hippopotamus? .

Socratic method weaknesses within EFL

Mitchell (2006) identifies the leading nature of Socratic questioning, "Socrates must know the answers to the questions posed…and the questions he asks are consequently strictly leading" (p. 183). It is this technique of leading students to a predetermined answer that interferes with meaningful exchanges and inhibits learning in the EFL classroom.

All of the question types introduced earlier can be delivered in a Socratic fashion. For example, in a regular display question the teacher already knows the answer, such as when asking, "What day is it today?" With a Socratic question, the teacher has already formulated an answer to the question, such as in, "Why do you think I'm happy today?" Confirmation checks are also abundant in the discourse of the Socratic method, such as in, "It's my birthday today? No..." Here instead of confirming real information, the teacher uses the questions as feedback to steer students away from incorrect answers.

Teachers who may intend to have a communicative class but begin with a Socratic question may find the attempts for discussion break apart. Rather than using Socratic questions, where there is an answer pre-formulated in the teacher's mind, if a teacher uses a non-retrieval imaginative question such as, "What do you think it would be like to live in the wild?", it could open the door to other related questions intended to direct students toward an answer to the original question. Socratic questioning is not ideal for use in a communicative English Language classroom, where the goal ideally would be to communicate, not to use deductive reasoning to arrive at an answer.

Background and data collection methodology

The observation was conducted in a private language school in Japan with a teacher who had only been in Japan for one year (T) and two male first year high school students (S1 & S2). The two students had been studying at the language school for about four years at the time the research was conducted. The teacher had limited Japanese ability. All parties were aware of the research and researcher and gave permission for recording the lesson and publishing the results of the research.

The students were studying the Longman Penguin Reader, *The Call of the Wild* (London, 2000). They were reading the chapter also titled The Call of the Wild. In this class, the teacher asked questions to determine if the students could infer the meaning of the title from the contents of the chapter.

Since my objective was to examine the teacher's questioning strategies, a pocket digital voice recorder was placed in front of the teacher and notes on the class were taken. The main focus of the observation and recording was to document the types of questions used, the kinds of teacher-student interaction witnessed, and the overall effect it had on the classroom discourse. Once the lesson was finished, the recording was transcribed to examine the teacher's questioning strategies.

Data analysis and presentation

The data was transcribed into an excel spreadsheet where the discourse was divided into 18 subsets labeled according to discourse group. Each discourse group was determined by the topic that was discussed within that group. Each time the teacher used a different question or different idea to steer the students to his formulated answer, a new discourse group was labeled. Only 6 lines into the lesson, the teacher entered a Socratic trap by asking a non-retrieval imaginative question, "What is the call of the wild?" From that question onward, all the teacher's questions were attempts to lead the students to his own pre-determined answer. Unfortunately, the opening question was so broad that the first half of the lesson was garbled and incompre-

hensible and it was difficult to extract enough sensible discourse to understand clearly what was happening. The teacher repeatedly asked a series of closed referential questions, trying to lead the students to the answer to his initial question, but was unable to get the students to clearly understand the meaning of the initial question. "What's the call?", "Who's calling?", "What animal howls?", "What kind of call?", "You have a cat, is a cat wild?", "Where's Buck from?", "In the camp, he's a nice dog right?" are a few examples of the questions asked to try and get the students to understand the meaning of the chapter title. Not until discourse group 13, included in Extract 1, does the teacher finally get his footing.

Extract 1. Discourse group 13

165: T: Yeah, you live in the wild, right? When you are hungry, do you go to the 7-11?
166: S1: Yes.
167: T: Yes? If you live in the forest right… and you're hungry, do you go to 7-11 or do you have to kill?
168: S2: Kill animal.
169: T: Yeah. Kill animal or catch fish, right?

In line 165, the teacher asked a Socratic question, yet the answer was not the one expected by the teacher, and the question was modified until it was answered according to the teacher's expectations. Then the class could move on.

Extract 2 offers another example of a Socratic question-led theme for discourse group 15.

Extract 2. Discourse group 15

181: T: ...But he wanted to kill an old larger animal. Why?
182: S2: Eh?
183: T: Why?
184: S1: Where?
185: T: ….Why did Buck want to kill a big moose? He killed a small one, now he wants to kill a big one. Why?
186: S1: Buck was hungry.
187: T: Not hungry, no, no, no
188: S1: Buck was angry.
189: T: Angry…Hmm.
190: S2: Strong.
191: T: Strong, yes.

Based on the feedback in line 187, when he asked the question the teacher had already formulated the desired answer. This is because while the question on line 181 appears as a non-retrieval imaginative question initially, asking for an opinion, when a student offers his answer in lines 186 and 188, the teacher dismisses them, even though they offer a communicative answer to the question. By line 191, the students have partially answered the question but the teacher moves on to help the student expand on the answer on line 191.

In line 213 in Extract 3 the teacher asks another Socratic question. He then uses the answer to move to discourse group 17 (Extract 4), which is headed by a non-retrieval imaginative question, the common thread being wanting to win at something.

Extract 3. Discourse Group 16

213: T: When you play tennis, do you want to win?
214: S2: Want?
215: T: Do you want to win?
216: S2: Yes

Extract 4. Discourse Group 17

217: T: Yes, so, Buck, Buck, wants to kill a big moose. Why?

The Socratic trap that the teacher has fallen into is a direct result of his questioning strategies. The initial question the teacher posed opened the trap and from that point the questions posed were only intended to help the students correctly answer the initial question.

Sidestepping the trap

The Socratic trap could have been prevented had the teacher taken a different approach in his questioning. Banbrook and Skehan (in Richards & Lockhart, 1996) give a clue to a successful strategy by stating, "[Questions] can be used to allow the learner to keep participating in the discourse and even modify it so that the language used becomes more comprehensible and personally relevant" (p. 185).

Asking students personally relevant questions that tied into the book could have been a better place to start the lesson: Where they live–in the city or the country; what they eat or do not like to eat; whether they like camping; or other questions that may have given them a context through which to interpret the different places the character Buck has been exposed to. This real and relevant discussion could continue by moving the questions from the students' immediate surroundings and experiences into the wild with questions such as: What animals live in the forest?, What do they eat?, What would you eat?, or Could you adapt to this new life? This approach should give the students a sense of what it would be like to move from a home to the wild and the meaning of the chapter title could be more effectively explored. Additionally, asking the students what they would do if forced to live in the wild could not only avoid the Socratic trap, but make the discourse personally relevant and allow for more communicative discourse.

Concluding remarks

It is not the intention of this paper to attack the Socratic method or the teacher using it. The use of the Socratic method is a successfully established questioning strategy within the technology education realm. However, within an EFL classroom, it can add considerably more confusion to the teacher-student interaction and thus inhibit opportunities for authentic exchange of ideas, thoughts, or opinions.

From the data observed in the transcript it is evident that the students spent most, if not all, of their cognitive energy trying to understand what the teacher was asking, and the remainder of their cognition was lost trying to find the often illusive answer the teacher had in mind. For the teacher's part, it could not have been much better: He was spending all his time trying to re-word, repeat, or paraphrase his questions so his students would understand him. He was also trying to negotiate a frustrating and unsatisfying teaching experience–one in which he was supposed to be in control but he could not seem to steer his students in the direction he wanted them to go.

The two unfortunate side effects of this failed lesson are that nobody involved could enjoy the lessons offered by London's classic *Call of the Wild* and even worse, there was little learning taking place. For these reasons, teachers wanting to improve their own teaching while increasing student learning opportunities may benefit from increased awareness of the Socratic trap and consciously avoid the kind of rhetorical questions that lead into it.

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"These two researchers strongly disagree with each other. They'd probably kill each other if they were in the same room."

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