

Motivating Students to Participate in Classroom Discussions through the Socratic Circle Approach

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Abstract

According to the staff of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Zenica, second year students are not easily motivated to participate in classroom discussions. Most of the time, students are encouraged to participate, but only a selected few do. When asked why that is so, students reported that they feel uncomfortable, mostly because they feel that they have nothing important to share or that they are embarrassed to speak in front of their colleagues. The author of this paper tried to encourage students to open up and participate in classroom discussions. For the purpose of this research, the author worked closely with second year students at the Department of English Language and Literature, introducing a new approach to ensure maximum student participation. The Socratic Circle approach was introduced and applied several times throughout the semester, and the students provided feedback each time they participated in the discussions. Two structures were used and the students were given the opportunity to express their opinions about each, as well as to comment about the Socratic Circle Rubric that was introduced for the purpose of grading their participation. This paper describes the steps that were taken over a four-month period. The author claims that by using the Socratic Circle approach, it is possible to motivate every student to participate in classroom discussions on a regular basis, and that the students appreciate the use of the Socratic Circle Rubric because they know what is expected of them as well as how their participation will be graded.

Motivating Students to Participate in Classroom Discussions through the Socratic Circle Approach

According to the great Greek philosopher, Socrates, inside us all the answers to human questions reside, and, if we participate in thoughtful and disciplined dialogue, we will help one another discover the ultimate truth. This disciplined dialogue, the Socratic Circle approach, is a pedagogical approach that encourages the participants to seek deeper understanding of concepts through dialogues and draw conclusions using the thoughtful responses of their peers. It frowns upon memorizing and regurgitating information that has been provided by the teacher. Instead, through dialogue, the students explore and analyse a given text through questioning and answering. The teacher serves as a facilitator, to ensure that the discussion advances. “In a study of 1,151 classroom discussions occurring in over 200 eighth and ninth grade classrooms 93.31% (1074 discussions) were completely monologic (teacher-centered) in nature... Of the 6.69% (77 discussions) that included “dialogic episodes” (moments when students directed the conversation), those episodes lasted for an average of 15 seconds.” (Nystrand et al., 2003). There are no such studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet, it is possible to find out if students are familiar with the Socratic Circle approach, if instructors use it, and what happens once the approach is applied. Most of the time, students are encouraged to participate in classroom discussions, but only a selected few do. When asked why that is so, students report that they feel uncomfortable, mostly because they feel that they have nothing important to share or that they are embarrassed to speak in front of their colleagues. The author of this paper tried to encourage students to open up and participate in classroom discussions. For the purpose of this research, the author worked closely with second year students in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Zenica, introducing a new approach to ensure maximum student participation. The Socratic Circle approach was introduced and applied a number of times throughout the semester, and the students provided feedback each time they

participated in the discussions. Two structures were used and the students were given the opportunity to express their opinions about each, as well as to comment about the Socratic Circle Rubric that was introduced for the purpose of grading their participation. This paper describes the steps that were taken over a four-month period. The author claims that by using the Socratic Circle approach, it is possible to motivate every student to participate in classroom discussions on a regular basis, and that the students appreciate the use of the Socratic Circle Rubric because they know what is expected of them as well as how their participation will be graded.

Methods

In order to gain a deeper understanding of students' behavior and the reasons that govern this behavior, the qualitative research method was used in this study. Through a questionnaire, the author learned if the Socratic Circle approach is used by teaching assistants who teach second year students, and if not, how the teaching assistants motivate the students to participate in classroom discussions. The students were asked to provide feedback after they had participated in the discussions. Students responded to a set of questions which aimed at determining which of the two structures of the Socratic Circle approach they prefer, how they feel in the circles, what they plan to do differently next time, and how they feel about being graded using the Socratic Circle Rubric.

The author of this paper is a lecturer at the University of Zenica. As such, she had the opportunity to conduct this research with second year students as part of her Oral Expression 1 class. She was given permission this study by the head of the Department of English Language and Literature.

Participants

The participants of this study were second year students in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Zenica. They all volunteered to participate in the study and to truthfully answer all the related questions (Appendix 1).

In addition to the students, the author asked colleagues in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Zenica teaching second year students to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix 2). The answers were used to determine both the level of participation of the second year students and to learn if the teaching assistants use the Socratic Circle approach with the students.

The Study

Second year students have six different classes during their first semester. Among them is Oral Expression 1, a class that aims at developing students' listening and speaking skills. Over a period of ten weeks, students read the book *Finding Fish* by Antwone Fisher, analyzed it, prepared discussion questions, and participated in class discussions using the Socratic Circle approach. Students were prepared for this approach by learning about it. The instructor introduced the first structure (inner circle participates in the discussion while the outer circle observes, evaluates and summarizes) and asked the students to comment on a set of questions asking how they felt being in the inner and in the outer circle (students rotated, and thus experienced both participating in the discussion and observing, evaluating, and summarizing). Students were encouraged to point out the positive and the negative experiences and to comment on their own performance, indicating what they would do differently next time. They were also asked if the Socratic Circle Rubric was a fair way to evaluate their performance and why. Next, the instructor introduced the second structure of the Socratic Circle approach in which the students

were no longer observing, summarizing and evaluating their peers. Instead, they were partners – the inner circle participated in the discussion, while the outer circle observed and wrote down additional ideas and questions. The outer circle then supplied the inner circle with these additional ideas and discussion questions. Students were asked to comment on the structure and to express how they felt participating in it.

The Socratic Circle Approach:

The Socratic Circle approach allows participants to discuss a given text without having to memorize information. Instead, the participants gain a deeper meaning of the text through thoughtful dialogues, guiding one another through ideas and questions to arrive at an answer. Structure 1

1. Students are divided into two concentric circles: the inner and the outer circle.
2. The instructor explains how the circles function: the students in the inner circle are the ones leading the discussion based on the reading, the analysis of the text, and the discussion questions they have prepared. The students in the outer circle observe the discussion, take notes, and assess the inner circle's performance using the Socratic Circle Rubric.
3. The Socratic Circle Rubric is distributed and discussed. It guides the students in the inner circle as to how to best contribute to the discussion, while it serves the students in the outer circle to assess their peers. Once the students are familiar with the expectations, it is clear what they need to do in order to get a high grade.
4. The discussion starts with an opening question (it can be a question that the instructor had prepared or a question that one of the students had generated). There is no right answer to this generic question. It should facilitate the students to define, clarify, speculate and evaluate an idea from the reading. From this point on, the discussion may go in various directions, depending on the ideas and the questions that the students generate. The students are

in charge and as they participate in the dialogue, they determine what will be discussed.

5. While the inner circle is participating in the dialogue, the outer circle uses the Socratic Circle Rubric to evaluate their peers. Each student in the outer circle is given the task to follow one inner circle participant.
6. The students in the outer circle take notes. Once the inner circle is done with a round of discussion, the students in the outer circle use their notes to generate a summary of the ideas and questions that had been discussed.

Structure 2

For this second type of Socratic Circle approach, the students are again divided into two groups, the inner and the outer circle. The only difference is that the students in the outer circle have a different role than they do in the previously described structure. Instead of evaluating their peers and summarizing the ideas that had been discussed, they serve as assistants who do not actively participate in the discussion. They contribute by listening to what is being discussed, preparing additional questions and ideas that should be discussed, writing them on a piece of paper, and supplying their partners with this piece of paper, so that their ideas are discussed as well. The partner, who is in the inner circle, can then use these ideas and questions to further develop the discussion and text analysis.

Grading. The Socratic Circle approach was introduced as a pilot project in the first semester. Although the grade that the students received for their participation did not count toward the final grade, the students did receive feedback. It was a descriptive grade which was generated using the Socratic Circle Rubric.

The Socratic Circle Rubric was introduced at the very beginning to inform the students what is expected of them as they participate in the

discussions. The instructor explained what the expectations were and pointed out what a student must do in order to earn points, which are then transformed into a number grade using a scale.

The Socratic Circle Rubric was used by both the students and the instructor. When applying the first structure (see above) of the Socratic Circle approach, the students were asked to evaluate their peers. Students were partnered up, so that one of them is in the inner circle, participating in the discussion, while the other one is in the outer circle, observing, summarizing what is being discussed, and evaluating their peer. Using the Socratic Circle Rubric, the students had the opportunity to give each other feedback and indicate what their partners did well and where improvement is needed. The same rubric is used by the instructor. This means that in the first structure of the Socratic Circle approach the students received feedback from both their peers as well as the instructor. Students rotated, so that each of them is in the inner circle and receives feedback. In the second structure, the students only received feedback from the instructor.

The Socratic Circle Rubric, adapted from Copeland, M. (2005). "Socratic Circle Rubric" (Figure 1), consists of six categories and three descriptors. The six categories are (1) understands the selected text, (2) participates in discussion, (3) supports ideas and evidence, (4) demonstrates critical mindedness, (5) demonstrates tolerance for uncertainty, and (6) listens and respects others. The three descriptors are: above target, target, and below target. Students in the outer circle as well as the instructor reflect on their peer's/student's performance in the Socratic Circle, and mark which box best describes their peer's/student's performance during the discussion.

Figure 1. Socratic Circle Rubric: adapted from Copeland, M. (2005) “Socratic Circle Rubric”

Socratic Circle Rubric			
Reflect on your peer’s performance in the Socratic circle and mark which box you think describes the peer’s performance during the discussion.			
Category/Descriptor	Above Target	Target	Below Target
Understands the selected text	Uses parts of the text in the discussion and shows understanding of the text.	Uses the text during the discussion but does not show understanding of the text.	Does not use any of the text in the discussion.
Participates in discussion	Demonstrates active participation throughout circle time.	Demonstrates active participation in at least half of the circle time.	Some participation, but off-task most of the circle time.
Supports ideas with evidence	Makes specific references to text and defends ideas with evidence regularly.	Makes references to text and defends ideas with evidence when he/she must.	Makes no references to text or does not defend ideas.
Demonstrates critical mindedness	Questions others during discussion in a way that makes sense and adds to the group’s discussion.	Questions and comments to others make sense but do not add to the group’s discussion.	Does not question others or questions do not make sense.
Demonstrates tolerance for uncertainty	Is able to listen and accept opinions different from his/her own.	Is able to listen to others’ opinions different from his/her own but does not use them.	Does not accept others’ opinions and is unwilling to listen to them.
Listens and respects others	Comments reflect active listening and respect of others.	Generally listens, but is not attentive to details.	Inattentive.

Instructor's Role. The instructor does not have a traditional teacher role in the Socratic Circle approach. He or she is responsible for selecting an insightful text that is relevant to the students and provokes discussion. In case the students read a book, it is the instructor's job to divide the book into logical sections and assign the readings. While in class, the instructor does not participate in the discussion. He or she may choose to prepare the opening question that will start the dialogue. Once the dialogue starts, the instructor takes on the facilitator role and ensures that the dialogue of the inner circle is focused and moving. The instructor also observes the students who are in the inner circle and uses the rubric to evaluate their participation.

Benefits and Flaws of the Socratic Circle Approach. The most important benefit of the Socratic Circle approach is the full participation of each student. Throughout the discussion, each student is applying him or herself and participating in a number of ways. Sometimes the participation is solely based on the discussion, yet, while those who do not participate in the discussion normally sit passively, in the Socratic Circle approach, they too are kept on their toes. If one does not participate in the discussion, he/she is busy summarizing what has been said, evaluating their peer, or preparing comments and questions for the given or the next round of discussion. Having this in mind, students come to class prepared, which is another great benefit of the Socratic Circle approach. This approach awakens the sense of responsibility in the students. They are aware that the discussion and the rest of the group will struggle if they are not prepared to participate, thus they read the assigned text, analyze it, and prepare discussion questions.

Though it has proven to be a very appealing method that the students enjoyed, the Socratic Circle approach has some flaws. First of all, it is time consuming for the instructor to explain the approach for the students to adapt to the novel method. Another issue is that the discussion may focus on broad ideas rather than specific, factual information and arrive at a conclusion without a complete closure. The instructor may

have a difficult time if the students arrive at a conclusion with which he or she is not familiar. In addition to that, the discussion may appear very unstructured to an uninformed observer. With all that said, it would be advisable to share these flaws with all the participants, as well as the outsiders, who may observe the discussions.

Findings and Discussion

By conducting a survey, the author learned that the teaching assistants working with second year students in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Zenica never use the Socratic Circles approach. They motivate the students by “choosing age-appropriate topics that often provoke different opinions and are relevant or interesting to the students,” by “telling [the students] the topics in advance (therefore giving them a chance to prepare themselves better), and by “promising some reward (not necessarily a material one)” such as “extra credit”. It is questionable if any of these methods prove to be successful, and if they actually motivate all the students to participate in the classroom discussions.

Through questionnaires that the students responded to, the author of this paper learned that the students had participated in classroom discussions before, yet majority of them do not “feel comfortable speaking in front of [their] colleagues.” They had never heard of the Socratic Circle approach, but were willing to test it. Once it was explained to them, the students concluded that they can benefit from this approach and commented that “[they] will work on their own speaking skills, [thus] improve their communicational skills” and “learn new vocabulary from other students.” Students had a positive attitude during the discussions, yet their responses to how they felt being in the inner circle varied.

During the first discussion, some students were unprepared. They did not finish the assigned reading and were, consequently, unable to fully

participate in the discussion. In the questionnaire, these students reported that they “felt bad” for not reading the book and “for not contributing to the discussion.” When asked what they would do differently next time, those students that were unprepared reported that they will “read at home and prepare discussion questions for next time.”

In the first structure of the Socratic Circle approach, some students reported feeling comfortable, but majority stated that “it is hard to be the center of attention and to talk while others are observing.” The outer circle reported that during this structure they had comments and wanted to participate, but were unable to do so, because they were assigned to observe, summarize, and evaluate. Doing what was asked of them gave the students a sense of accomplishment – students reported feeling confident and relaxed once they joined the circle and started the discussion.

Students indicated that they prefer the “second” Socratic Circle approach, the one in which the inner and the outer circles collaborate to generate the questions and ideas that are used in the inner circle. Students reported that “[they] felt more comfortable knowing that their fellow students will help them when it is their turn to contribute to the conversation,” and that “[they] learned from one another in this setting.” Students reported that “working with a partner was helpful,” as “the partners helped [them] when [they] were stuck” and the outer circle reported that suddenly they “[were] able to participate by passing the notes to their partners” and thus “[they] felt useful.”

Students also reported that the Socratic Circle Rubric was very helpful. They knew exactly what was expected of them and the grading was fair. The majority of them suggested that the rubric be distributed during the explanation of the approach, as it “provides [the students] with detailed information on how to best prepare for the discussion.”

Conclusion

In search of an effective approach that motivates students to participate in classroom discussions and complete the assigned tasks at home, the author of this paper decided to try the Socratic Circle approach. Although the students had participated in classroom discussions, they had never heard of the Socratic Circle approach. Once it was introduced, the students positively reacted to its benefits. Though the approach is time consuming, the students were patient, they kept a positive attitude, and wanted to try it. They noticed that if they all contribute, they will learn from one another. Students were pleased to learn that their participation will be evaluated using a Socratic Circle Rubric. They were familiar with the concept, so all the instructor had to do is share the specifics of this particular rubric. It is important to note that there were noticeable changes in the students' behavior. Those who previously came to class unprepared suddenly felt a sense of responsibility. They realized that if they do not do what is asked of them, the rest of the group cannot function. Suddenly, all students were reading the assigned book, analyzing it, and preparing discussion questions.

All in all, the semester was a very active one. All second year students worked very hard, participated in the discussions, and greatly contributed to their own as well as their peer's positive experience with the Socratic Circle approach. The approach itself proved to be a great motivation tool. The goal of ensuring maximum student participation was achieved. It would be interesting to see if the skills that these students have acquired transfer to other in class discussions.

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Appendix 1

First set of questions:

1. How do you think you will benefit from applying the Socratic Circle approach?
2. Is the grading using the Socratic Circle Rubric fair? Why?
3. What kind of difficulties could we face as a group or individually using the Socratic Circle approach?

Second set of questions:

1. How did you feel during your time in the inner circle? Provide one positive and one negative aspect.
2. How did you feel during your time in the outer circle? Provide one positive and one negative aspect.
3. Do you have any suggestions for our next discussion?
4. How well do you think you did today?
5. What will you do to better prepare for our next discussion?

Third set of questions:

1. Which of the two structures of the Socratic Circle approach do you prefer and why?
2. Do you think that the Socratic Circle approach should be used with future generations of English Language and Literature majors? Why?

