

# SOCRATIC SEMINAR, A PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE FOR THE SELF-IMPROVEMENT OF LEARNERS IN EFL CONTEXT: THE EXAMPLE OF SENEGAL

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**Abstract:** *This theoretical contribution suggests a teaching model inspired from Socrates' method known as Socratic seminar. Thus, the literature on the ground has been structured into two parts. The former is about the historical context of Socratic seminar which relates the origin of the practice, and the latter is about the reviewed studies which questioned the perspectives of some authors who wrote about the issue. In this respect, Chorzęmpa & Lapidus (2009) maintain that Socratic seminar should be text-centered; Paul & Elder (2007) believe that the practice establishes a connection between discussion and critical thinking. In addition, Délic & Bécirovic (2016) emphasize on autonomy in learning. Finally, Adler (1982) and Paul (1990) assert that Socratic seminar builds confidence. Furthermore, some theories on which the reviewed studies are based on have been mobilized. Among them, there is the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky which stipulates that learning occurs through discussion, and interaction with more knowledgeable persons. Then, we have questioned the constructivist theory of Piaget and Bruner which informs that learners gain knowledge through personal experience and reflection rather than spoon feeding. Freire's critical pedagogy regards learning as an opportunity to foster critical consciousness and active engagement. Throughout this study, we have demonstrated that the literature has reinforced the theories. In other words, the literature is in line with the theoretical foundations. Consequently, as practical implication, Socratic seminar is highly recommended in the Senegalese context with large classes where some teachers are still sticking to the traditional method of teaching which is purely transmissive.*

**Keywords.** *Socratic seminar, critical thinking, learner autonomy.*

## Introduction

Despite the current use of communicative language teaching in Senegalese schools, a good command of the English language is still a great challenge in our learning

environment which consists of large classes. To address this gap, Socratic seminar as a pedagogical practice is suggested in large classes. A lack of reaction from the school stakeholders might entail frustration and demotivation if the gap is not addressed as it should. Thus, most high school students nowadays prefer other foreign languages much more than English. However, the implementation of Socratic Seminar in large classes might be helpful in as much as we do hope that it can facilitate autonomous learning while developing some the key language skills. So, the purpose of this theoretical contribution is to demonstrate how effective Socratic Seminar might be when used in the learning process of English in large classes such as in the Senegalese schools of suburban areas. In this paper, we are going to ask the following research questions: How might we facilitate autonomous learning for critical thinking among learners in large classes with the support of Socratic seminar? How might we develop some key language skills like reading and communication with the support of Socratic seminar?

In order to answer these questions, we provide a first section on the literature review; a second section is about the theoretical foundations of the study; finally, a third section is built to discuss the implications and the limitations of our study.

## **1. Literature review**

### ***1.2. Socratic seminar: historical context and rationale behind***

A pedagogical practice inspired by the Socratic method which originates with Socrates, Athenian philosopher who lived around 470 B.C (Délac & Bécirovic, 2016: 512).

However, as a son of a sculptor he thought that his vocation was actually the sculpting of young minds (Knezic et al., 2010). Departing from this principle, Socrates provided broad definitions for the concepts of virtue, beauty, justice, courage, and friendship. He managed to reach this goal by engaging people in conversations so as they could have a clear idea about these concepts. Furthermore, a more explicit definition of the Socratic method is provided by Schiller (2008). For this purpose, the latter describes Socrates' method:

“Accordingly, he asked questions, letting the other man do most of the talking, but keeping the course of the conversation under his control, and so would expose the inadequacy of the proposed definition of courage. The other would fall back on a fresh or modified definition, and so the process would go on, with or final success.” (Schiller, 2008: 3)

Actually, the method of Socrates is not meant to teach in a proper sense of the word: “Teacher is an observer, a helper, a guide, but not purveyor of the knowledge.” (Délac & Bécirovic, 2016: 512). The learner as a rote memorizer and the teacher as a know-all are regarded as an ineffective teaching method, so the teaching based on the Socratic method becomes “shared dialogues with students and teachers where both are responsible for pushing the dialogue forward through questioning.” (ibid, 2016).

And this can happen through questions asked by the teacher or the students among themselves. Through his method, Socrates demonstrates that everyone can learn by themselves by using their own minds, as his intention is “to create each person being a master of his own mind and being state.” (Délac & Bécirovic, 2016: 512).

By so doing, the learners can develop critical thinking by themselves. Additionally, with the Socratic method the teacher is expected to ask questions rather than give answers. It is the students who find answers by themselves developing their minds – hence critical thinking.

Since the critical thinking skills cannot be directly taught, by the Socratic method the mind can be engaged and cultivated, and students are fostered to improve these skills (Lam, 2011).

## **1.2. Perceptions of Socratic seminar**

Chorzempa & Lapidus (2009) posit that Socratic seminar is text-centered. Socratic seminars (also known as Socratic circles) are exploratory intellectual conversations centered on the text and designed in such a way to resemble Socrates' instruction-through-questioning method (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009). Not only does the pedagogical practice help learners to converse and share ideas, but it also develops reading skills, since the questioning and the reflections can be text-based. As for the process, teachers can facilitate it by first introducing the text to the students and then engaging them in their preparation for the Socratic seminar (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009). This implies focusing on a text-based information to ask one another questions and discuss in order to find answers by themselves.

Paul & Elder (2007) have a slightly different perspective on the question. They perceive the practice as a means of establishing connection between discussion and critical thinking. Thus, Socratic questioning is an art which is closely linked to critical thinking because it is vital to the brilliance of thinking (Paul & Elder, 2007). To better highlight their view, we can say that questioning and discussion support learners to develop critical thinking by themselves, which is another way to facilitate self-improvement or independent learning. The two authors extend their view by supporting the idea that Socratic discussion and critical thinking have a common goal. Furthermore, the conceptual tools which are necessary to understand how the mind works develop critical thinking. And the Socratic approach makes use of those tools to frame questions vital for finding truth and meaning.

Délic & Bécirovic (2016) emphasized independent or autonomous learning during the process of Socratic seminar. They conclude:

“With his dialogue, Socrates made a transition to a human-centered education from an authority-centered one and he made a strong emphasis on the importance of a huge learning capacity and creativity of human kind.” (Délic & Bécirovic, 2016: 514).

As a result, the practice offers an atmosphere of intellectual engagement, cooperation, and conversation in which students learn the differences between dialogue and debate (Délic & Bécirovic, 2016). In other words, the expectation of the discussion is not to know the winner but rather to see that all the learners take part in the discussion while providing ideas with their own minds.

In the same vein, Adler (1982) and Paul (1990) assert that Socratic seminars engender confidence. Following the same logical reasoning, Paul (1990) maintains that confidence is essential to building a democracy, because with confidence individuals resist manipulation by media, special interest groups, or inner prejudices and irrationalities. Lambright (1995) claims that Socratic seminars can reach at-risk students because the course materials and learning methods give them new confidence in the learning process not seen in the traditional lecture setting.

In sum, our literature review has shown that Chorzempa & Lapidus (2009) perceive Socratic seminar as a text-centered activity that develops reading and the seeking of truth through questioning. Paul & Elder (2007) see the practice as a bridge between discussion and critical thinking. Délic & Bécirovic (2016) understand Socratic seminar as learning centered on human reasoning rather than authority for the purpose of cooperation, engagement, and

generating ideas. As for Adler (1982) and Paul (1990), they believe that Socrates' method helps build confidence among learners. From our own perspective, Socratic seminar would be more effective if it were used to develop oral skills throughout reading in large classes. This would really be supportive for our learners, since they encourage cooperation and independent learning, build confidence, develop critical thinking, and engage all learners, despite the fact that most classes in the suburban schools of Sénégal are very large.

## **2. Theoretical foundations**

The literature review above demonstrates that Socratic Seminar is not only a historical pedagogical practice but also one that aligns with many other learning theories. To fully comprehend its relevance to the Senegalese context, particularly in large English classrooms, it is essential to examine the theoretical foundations that support Socratic Seminar in practice. These theories provide the conceptual lenses through which we can interpret how Socratic Seminar facilitate autonomous learning, critical thinking, and language skill development.

### ***2.1. Socio-cultural theory***

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist known for his sociocultural theory of cognitive development, provides one of the strongest justifications for the use of Socratic Seminar. According to his perspective and research, learning occurs in social contexts through interactions, dialogue, and collaboration. He states: "What the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow." (Vygotsky, 1978: 87).

Key concepts from Vygotsky (1978) include the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), which is the idea that children learn best with guidance from a "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO). In other words, the "Zone of Proximal Development" illuminates how learners grow when guided by more capable peers or teachers (Vygotsky, 1978).

In a Socratic seminar, students do not receive ready-made answers from the teacher, but instead engage with one another. Each student comes from a different background with different lived experiences. Allowing students to share their varied perspectives creates a space where each participant in the Socratic seminar contributes with ideas and questions that help scaffold the understanding of others. For large classes in Senegal, this collaborative model decentralizes authority, allowing multiple learners to engage in shared dialogue rather than rely solely on teacher explanations. In this way, the sociocultural theory demonstrates how the Socratic seminar promotes critical and higher-level thinking through peer interactions and facilitates autonomous learning by encouraging students to take ownership of their learning.

### ***2.2. Constructivism***

Constructivist theories, including those of Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner, assert that learners gain knowledge through personal experience and reflection, rather than passively absorbing information. Piaget, considered to be the founding father of constructivism, observes that: "Each time one prematurely teaches a child something he could have discovered himself, that child is kept from inventing it and consequently from understanding it completely" (Piaget, 1970: 715).

Similarly, Bruner emphasizes: "True learning involves figuring out how to use what you already know in order to go beyond what you already think." (Bruner, 1960: 13).

Socratic seminars require students to generate, test, and refine their ideas during discussions. Students are no longer passive recipients of teacher-delivered lectures but are learners building their own understanding of texts and issues through questioning. In large classes, where student participation is often limited, constructivist pedagogy can empower learners so that they strengthen and develop their comprehension and oral skills by discovering answers by themselves, right along with their peers. Reading comprehension improves thanks to Socratic seminars as they revisit and interpret texts, while oral communication is strengthened with the help of repetition and articulation of ideas.

In Senegal, for example, students are taught in a French speaking context. The English class can be one of the few times students can practice their English language speaking skills. Thus, Socratic seminars would be very supportive in such a context. All in all, constructivism reinforces the view that Socratic seminars provide a pathway to both critical thinking and language skill development, especially in EFL context with large classes as in Senegal.

### ***2.3. Critical pedagogy***

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy emphasizes dialogue, problem-posing, and the rejection of the "banking model" of education, which is described as teachers depositing knowledge into passive students (Freire, 1970). Instead, education should foster critical consciousness, active engagement, and dialogue. The theorist critiques this traditional view when he writes: "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor (Freire, 1970:72). Instead, Freire advocates for dialogic education where "teachers and students become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire, 1970: 80).

Socratic seminars embody these principles by giving learners a voice and positioning them as active participants in their own learning. In the Senegalese context, where a traditional classroom often relies on teacher-centered instruction, Socratic seminars represent a transformative student-centered practice. They not only allow a safe space for practicing their English communication, but also affirm their ability to think critically, and even question authority. This particular aspect of Freire's critical pedagogy is important for fostering agency and confidence among students who may feel more invisible in large classes.

### ***2.4. Synthesis of the theories***

Together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that Socratic seminars have a strong foundation in encouraging autonomy for learners and language skills development. Vygotsky (1978) explains that peer dialogue fosters growth. Constructivism with Piaget (1970) and Bruner (1960) highlights the role of learner-driven and meaningful classroom experiences, and Freire (1970) discusses the liberating and change-making nature of dialogue. In English classes, Socratic seminars can develop reading skills through text-based questioning, oral communication through sustained dialogue, and critical thinking through the evaluation of multiple perspectives. The aforementioned theoretical perspectives collectively justify by examining how Socratic seminars may respond to the challenge of large English classes in Senegal.

### 3. Discussion

The literature that has been reviewed within this study has not only established the relevance of the Socratic seminar, but it has also reinforced and expanded the theoretical foundations discussed above. Analyzing how previous scholars describe the outcomes of Socrates' practice, we have come to a better understanding on how the method connects to sociocultural theories, constructivism, and critical pedagogy in practice. This section discusses these implications, illuminating both areas of alignment and the ones that call for theoretical extension and criticality.

#### 3.1. Theoretical implications

The reviewed works on Sociocultural theories (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009; Délic & Bécirovic, 2016), emphasize the dialogue focused, student-centered and the collaborative and cooperative nature of the Socratic Seminar. Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) describe Socratic seminar as "exploratory intellectual conversations centered on a text and designed to resemble Socrates' instruction-through-questioning method" (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009: 54).

Similarly, Délic and Bécirovic (2016) argue: "The teaching based on the Socratic method becomes shared dialogues with students and teachers where both are responsible for pushing the dialogue forward through questioning (Délic & Bécirovic, 2016: 512).

These findings strongly support Vygotsky's idea that learning is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). When students exchange ideas with each other, they extend each other's understanding within the zone of proximal development. For Senegalese learners, this implies that even in large classrooms, peer instruction can function as scaffolding, and will increase opportunities for autonomous meaning-making, which then reduces the over-reliance on teacher explanation that we often see in the Senegalese classrooms.

The literature also shows us that the Socratic seminars enable learners to construct their own knowledge. Paul and Elder (2007) describe Socratic questioning as a bridge to critical thinking, which perfectly aligns with the constructivist emphasis of learners testing and refining their own skill in the classroom (Piaget, 1970; Bruner, 1960). Paul & Elder (2007) highlight the link between Socratic questioning and critical thinking by stating that "To think through, we must ask questions that stimulate our thought, questions essential to every discipline of human inquiry" (Paul & Elder, 2007: 36).

Similarly, Chorzempa and Lapidus (2009) note that Socratic seminars facilitate deeper analysis and engagement of the texts. This confirms the theoretical claim that knowledge is actively built, not passively received. The implication here is that the Socratic seminar is particularly well-suited to a context where rote-memorization has dominated the educational process so far, since it creates the perfect conditions where learners can experience and practice autonomy in the construction of meaning.

The reviewed studies also reinforce Freire's call for education to be dialogic, change-making, and liberating (Freire 1970). Freire (1970) insists that: "without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education." (Freire, 1970: 93)

Délic and Bécirovic (2016) echo this when they write: "With his dialogues, Socrates made a transition to a human-centered education from an authority-centered one. (Délic & Bécirovic, 2016: 514) Délic & Bécirovic (2016) highlight that the Socratic Seminar transitions education from an authority-centered to learner-centered, which echoes Freire's rejection of hierarchy in the classroom and teacher dominated models. Likewise, Adler

(1982) emphasizes that confidence is vital to democracy, noting that “education for democracy must cultivate habits of discussion and inquiry”. (Adler, 1982: 6).

Paul (1990) adds that critical thinking equips learners to resist manipulation, which is key in both education and civic life. Adler (1982) and Paul (1990) further discuss that seminars build learner confidence, which is incredibly important in a language learning classroom, but is also a crucial step in resisting manipulation and encouraging participation in democratic societies. In Senegal, where students often lack confidence in English, this implication is especially significant because Socratic seminars not only build language skills, but also cultivate learners’ sense of agency.

### ***3.2. Extension of the theoretical lens***

While our literature aligns with these theories, it also extends them. For instance, Adler (1982) and Lambright (1995) stress the role of the Socratic seminar in building confidence and also reaching at-risk youth. Lambright (1995) stresses that Socratic seminars can reach learners because the course materials and learning methods give them new confidence in the learning process, unlike in the traditional learning process (Lambright, 1995: 31).

However, these dimensions are not always explicit in sociocultural or constructivist frameworks. This suggests that theoretical models of the Socratic seminar should not only incorporate affective and motivational outcomes, but also cognitive development. Furthermore, the challenge of applying Socratic seminars in large Senegalese classrooms raises questions about practical implementation: how to ensure that all learners’ voices are heard, how to adapt text selections to variable proficiency levels, and how to train teachers for facilitation. These considerations highlight the need for contextual adaptation of otherwise universal theories.

### ***3.3. Practical implications for research and practice***

Together, this literature strengthens the theoretical justification for Socratic seminars as a response to the research questions guiding this study. It shows that the practice can guide autonomous learning and critical thinking (Paul & Elder, 2007; Délic & Bécirovic, 2016), while also promoting reading and communicative skills (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009). The reviewed studies also imply that confidence, motivation, and equity of participation are essential outcomes that must be addressed when applying these theories in large Senegalese classrooms (Adler, 1982; Paul, 1990; Lambright, 1995). Thus, the implications of the literature review confirm the theoretical relevance of Socratic seminars while also pointing to areas where theory must evolve to meet contextual realities on the ground.

## **Conclusion**

In the light of this study, the reviewed literature is in alignment with the theoretical foundations and offers a new lens / approach to teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are no longer about being authoritarian by imposing and spoon-feeding learners, but they are about liberating learners by allowing them to be in charge of their own learning so as to construct knowledge. This might easily be achieved with the help of Socratic seminars which favour critical thinking and learner autonomy. Also, this might also be very effective in the EFL context with large classes as in the Senegalese context. Furthermore, the theories that we have questioned in our study underpin the relevance of the Socratic seminar in the Senegalese context where English is taught in a francophone

setting with large classes. In addition, some teachers are reluctant to part with the classical method which puts teachers at the center of learning rather than students. So, these theories contribute to highlight the fact that learning should encourage critical thinking, and autonomy through self-construction of knowledge – hence a new standpoint about learning in the Senegalese context.

Consequently, if the Senegalese teachers were informed and well-trained in Socrates' method, we would overcome the challenges of lack of fluency and over dependence on teachers in English classes. In this regard, the stakeholders of the Senegalese system should think about organizing training sessions about the Socratic seminar method. We could also introduce Socrates' method in the national syllabus in order to integrate reading and speaking to develop oral skills and critical thinking in EFL contexts in Senegal.

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