

IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS WITH THE SOCRATIC METHOD*N. Tillayeva*¹*Abstract:*

The article focuses on the implementation of Socratic seminars in EFL/ESL writing classes as an important tool to develop writing skills. According to the observations throughout the years, most EFL students often struggle with expressing their point of view in written form. The problems with the writing are mainly associated with generating and organizing topic-related ideas, accuracy, and vocabulary usage. The study explores the effectiveness of Socratic questioning in cultivating critical thinking and developing productive skills, including writing skills. The literature review reveals that Socratic seminars and questioning are effective ways to develop a way of thinking that can lead to effective engagement and language acquisition. Furthermore, Socratic seminars offer a promising pedagogical approach to dealing with problems like cultural diversity and multi-level language proficiency. The pre- and post-exploratory process survey, which included 25 university freshman year students with intermediate-B1 English language ability, employed a mixed-methods technique. The findings of a post-exploratory survey suggest that Socratic seminars improve language learners' capacity to integrate situations and details in order to maintain the coherence and cohesiveness of spoken and written output. As a follow-up activity, peer-reviewing adds further support to the development of accuracy, fluency, coherence, and cohesion in both spoken and written discourse. Overall, Socratic seminars contribute to the cultivation of critical thinking, discourse management, and effective communication skills, which are very important in their academic lives.

Key words: Socratic questioning, cognitive ability, critical thinking, composition writing, task achievement

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Introduction:

Acquiring proficient writing skills in language classes is a complex task for ESL students. They often struggle with developing clear ideas, organizing thoughts logically, and avoiding accuracy and vocabulary usage problems. Recognizing the connection between cognitive growth and writing competence, educators have increasingly turned to integrating cognitive skill development, including critical thinking, into ESL writing instruction. Strategies like Socratic seminars provide a dynamic platform for ESL students to engage in meaningful discussions, fostering the cognitive skills necessary to address writing challenges and refine their expressive writing abilities. This article explores how integrating Socratic seminars, with a focus on critical thinking and collaborative discussion, can help ESL students overcome these writing hurdles.

A Literature Review:

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Socratic seminars, deeply rooted in Socratic philosophy, are student-centered teaching techniques that rely on organized, open-ended dialogues. These dialogues encourage participants to investigate complex subject matter, express various viewpoints, and collaboratively arrive at innovative conclusions (Echevarria & Short, 2004). These thought-provoking discussions typically revolve around engaging texts, enabling students to ask questions, evaluate concepts, and engage in constructive dialogue, ultimately strengthening their critical thinking and communication skills.

Incorporating Socratic seminars can extend beyond language acquisition, addressing the development of critical thinking skills essential in ESL teaching (Wang & Tang, 2019). These seminars engage higher-order cognitive processes by encouraging participants to formulate probing questions and articulate insightful arguments. The ability to analyze facts, evaluate arguments, and synthesize ideas becomes second nature, cultivating an analytical rigor that extends beyond the classroom.

Socratic seminars are also known for their ability to promote student participation and motivation (Nguyen & Gu, 2020). The interactive nature of these seminars not only encourages active participation but also peer interaction, creating a dynamic learning environment where ideas are discussed and debated. This collaborative dynamic fosters a sense of ownership in learners, motivating them to engage more deeply with the subject matter and consequently improving their written and spoken communication.

However, the integration of Socratic seminars in ESL classes has sparked debates among scholars and educators. Concerns about cultural sensitivity in diverse ESL classrooms, where communication norms and teaching styles may vary significantly, have been raised (Nguyen & Gu, 2020). Additionally, variations in students' language proficiency levels could lead to uneven participation during Socratic seminars, potentially demotivating those with lower language skills (Liu & Wang, 2016). These concerns highlight the need for careful consideration of the benefits and challenges of incorporating Socratic seminars in ESL writing classes.

Methodology:

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of integrating Socratic seminars into ESL writing classes. It involves 25 university freshman students with intermediate English proficiency. The research addresses three key research questions:

- Why do teachers believe students need extra support to improve their writing skills?

- To what extent does collaborative discourse during Socratic seminars enhance ESL students' writing abilities?

- How do ESL students perceive the role of Socratic seminars in addressing challenges related to generating clear ideas and structuring thoughts in writing?

The research begins with semi-structured interviews to identify common writing challenges among the students. These interviews are transcribed and analyzed to identify recurring themes and challenges related to idea generation, thought structuring, and other writing difficulties.

Next, students are tasked with composing an essay on a given topic without prior preparation. The essays are evaluated using rubrics that assess task achievement, accuracy, vocabulary usage, coherence, and cohesion. The analysis of these essays reveals that many students struggle with aspects such

as generating clear ideas and structuring them coherently, compared to issues like accuracy and vocabulary usage.

Results and Analysis:

The research findings demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating Socratic seminars into ESL writing classes. During the designed lessons, students engage in discussions and activities aimed at addressing their cognitive challenges in writing. The lessons focus on equipping intermediate ESL students with the skills to compose well-structured argumentative essays through Socratic seminars.

Students begin by sharing their initial opinions on a given topic, sparking debates that encourage critical thinking and the exchange of ideas. Following this, they analyze texts related to the topic in small groups during Socratic seminar discussions. These discussions help students refine their analytical and critical thinking skills.

Subsequently, students work in smaller groups to create outlines for their essays, fostering collaboration and effective idea generation. They present their outlines to their peers, further enhancing their communication skills. This collaborative approach continues with peer reviews of their essays, helping students improve their writing through feedback and constructive criticism.

The integration of Socratic seminars has a noticeable positive impact on the quality of essays produced by the students. Many students effectively incorporate details into their essays, justify their arguments with supportive ideas, and maintain a clear and logical flow of ideas. Peer review plays a pivotal role in enhancing essay accuracy and clarity.

However, it's important to acknowledge the potential drawbacks of Socratic seminars, including time constraints and challenges posed by large class sizes. These issues must be considered when implementing Socratic seminars in ESL writing classes.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the integration of Socratic seminars into ESL writing classes positively impacts students' writing skills by promoting critical thinking, collaborative discourse, and effective communication. Socratic seminars contribute to improved idea integration, coherence, and cohesion in students' writing, addressing common challenges in ESL writing classes.

These seminars also enhance students' organizational skills, leading to logically structured essays. Peer review further improves language accuracy and clarity. The interactive and collaborative nature of Socratic seminars enriches students' content and idea generation, resulting in more compelling and insightful written compositions.

Given these positive outcomes, it is strongly recommended to incorporate Socratic seminars into ESL writing classes as a valuable approach to enhancing students' writing skills. These seminars not only empower students in their academic journey but also equip them with essential lifelong skills, such as critical thinking, collaborative discourse, and effective communication.

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