Developing English-Speaking Skills through Socratic Questioning in Online Synchronous Learning

Kurt S. Candilas

Dean, Arts and Sciences Program, Lourdes College, Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines
Corresponding author's email: kurt.candilas@lccdo.edu.ph, mrkurtz21@gmail.com

Abstract

Online synchronous learning is a digital teaching platform that supports learning in the time of the pandemic. However, it provides less speaking participation for students. This study explores the effectiveness of Socratic questioning in developing students' English-speaking skills during their online synchronous class. This study used the Pre-experimental - one-group pretest and posttest design. Thirty-five (35) students who were asked for their consent participated in this study. The study was conducted in one of the classes in Purposive Communication in a private college in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, for the first semester of the AY 2020-2021. The instrument used in assessing students' English-Speaking Skills is the Student Oral Observation Matrix (SOLOM), taken from the Riverside County Seal of Multiliteracy (2008). The study used Paul's (2001) model of Socratic questioning. Based on the findings, through the lens and principles of reasons, Socratic questioning helped improve students' English-speaking skills in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. The result of this study confirms Paul's (2001) model of Socratic questioning, stressing that by working through an organized procedure of framing questions during discussions and other oral-related activities, learners are disciplined and trained to speak and reason. This finding, therefore, calls for the need of teachers to utilize Socratic questioning in their online synchronous learning to develop student's skills in speaking, which in turn enliven their active participation in the virtual class.

Keywords: *English-speaking Skills, Socratic Questioning, Online Synchronous Learning*

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic brought a sudden impact and took a toll on all schools' educational processes and services across the globe. It brings challenges to the academic community to redesign and realign its operation systems on instructional delivery (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020; Kaur, 2020). Teachers from primary up until they graduate level have had to switch and adapt to different distance education forms. Among these other educational platforms of distance education is online learning.

Indeed, online learning is no longer a new trend in education. Many schools across the countries have had this mode of learning even before the advent of the COVID 19. The mushrooming of online education at present has just become a worldwide movement for education due to the declaration of COVID-19 as a global health crisis. In online learning education in the time of the pandemic, educational institutions used either synchronous and asynchronous digital teaching (Karatas and Tuncer, 2020; Farros, Shawler, and Gatzunis, and Weiss, 2029). These two basic types of digital teaching are commonly used by schools to support learning.

Acknowledging the need of students to continue learning amidst pandemics, online education learning is seen to be the viable way for continuing education which also helps to put a curb on the spread of COVID-19. Weighing the benefits of online education learning for students to be independent and collaborative (Berge, 2000; Parker and Gemino, 2001, Chan et al. 2009), another equally severe outcome of the existing online education that has received little attention is the declined opportunity for students to improve their speaking proficiency (Tanian and James, 2002). Being an English and communication teacher and the dean of a college in a private tertiary school in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, the researcher has observed this phenomenon where students during their synchronous classes are reluctant to express their thoughts and opinions during lectures and other online learning activities. It is also observed that when their teachers are asking them, the substance of views is not clear and coherent. The ideas being expressed are likely unstructured and unparalleled to what is being asked from them. Some of them are shy and would not say a word due to the difficulty of using appropriate English words. Others, too, are translanguaging using the Cebuano Visayan Language when they are answering and questioning during their virtual class so that their ideas can get across to their teachers and classmates, respectively. This phenomenon was also observed and reinforced by other previous studies even

before the pandemic where online education is already existing and offered in school (Arnold, 2007; Tanian and James, 2002; Skinner, 2009).

Although these setbacks in speaking may be attributed to some reasons, the present study seeks to develop the students' speaking skills through Socratic questioning in asynchronous learning. The objective, therefore, is to introduce Socratic questioning as an approach to teaching, thereby aiming not to strike fear in the hearts of students so that they may articulate intelligibly their thoughts guided with their beliefs that do not withstand scrutiny. Hence, the conduct of the study.

Statement of the Problem

1. What is the participants' level of English Speaking Skills before and after the intervention considering the following:

    1.1 pronunciation;

    1.2 vocabulary;

    1.3 grammar;

    1.4 fluency; and

    1.5 comprehension?

2. Is there a significant difference in students' performance in Socratic Questioning before and after the intervention?

Methods

This study used the Pre-experimental - one-group pretest and posttest design. Using this design, the students were assessed in their English-Speaking Skills during pretest and posttest. The intervention of Socratic questioning was given after the pretest and before the posttest to compare the difference of scores and to see the improvement of students in speaking English. Before the conduct of this study, the thirty-five (35) students were asked to participate. The study was conducted in one of the Purposive Communication classes in a private college in Cagayan de Oro City for the first semester of the AY 2020-2021. These students were selected as the participants of the study as they are the current students being handled by the researcher himself. Also, the

nature of the participants' subject in the researcher's class is communication. This impels the researcher to choose these participants as they have already prior knowledge of speaking. The instrument used in assessing students' English-Speaking Skills is the Student Oral Observation Matrix (SOLOM), taken from the Riverside County Seal of Multiliteracy (2008). A fellow inter-rater was also requested during the assessment of students English-speaking skills to ensure the objectivity of the assessment. The study employed Paul's (2001) principle of Socratic questioning using the following processes: questions for clarification, questions that probe assumptions, questions that probe reasons and evidence, questions about viewpoints and perspectives, questions that probe implications and consequences, and questions about the question. The Socratic question as the intervention was allotted for eight weeks. Such categories for questioning do not necessarily follow a pattern as students' responses are leading to another category of questions that the researcher is determining. To implement the Socratic Questioning, the researcher being the teacher himself, conducted the following tasks every week during the synchronous learning: planned the sessions every synchronous session always to have the significant questions that provide structure and direction to the lesson; crafted questions to be clear and specific to students learning; maintained silence and wait for at least 5-10 seconds for students to deliver their response to the question; kept the discussion focus; followed-up students verbal responses and let them elaborate their thoughts and ideas; used probing questions for reasons and evidence, and summarized what has been discussed. Descriptive statistics such as mean distribution were used to measure the students' English-speaking skills and T-Test to measure their performance in implementing Socratic questioning in the virtual class in Purposive Communication.

Results and Discussions

Table 1 shows the mean distribution of students' level of English-speaking skills before and after the intervention. As gleaned above, student participants' responses in English-speaking skills showed the homogeneity of their responses, as indicated in the standard deviation of 0.49 from both pretest and posttest. This entails that they had similar responses to the indicators. In the pretest, the result indicated that comprehension (3.73), grammar (3.28), fluency (2.78), pronunciation (2.71), and vocabulary (2.59) of participant's areas in English-speaking skills are rated as good. A rating of good from these areas means that participants manage to understand

most of what is said at a slower than normal speed although repetitions are observed, frequent errors of grammar and word order occasionally obscure the substance of what the student participants intend to mean from their answers, speed and fluency are strongly affected by language problems which made them have occasional word fillers when talking, pronunciation problems necessitate concentration and occasionally lead to misunderstanding, frequent use of wrong terminologies in English are also observed during the one-on-one virtual informal interview.

Table 1.

Mean Distribution of Students' Level of English-Speaking Skills Before and After the Intervention

English Speaking Skills			**Pretest**	**Posttest**
		Mean	2.71	2.78
		SD	.044	.046
	Pronunciation	**Description**	**Good**	**Good**
		Mean	2.59	3.73
		SD	.031	.047
	Vocabulary	**Description**	**Good**	**Very Good**
		Mean	3.28	3.33
		SD	.083	.086
	Grammar	**Description**	**Good**	**Good**
		Mean	2.78	2.88
		SD	.046	.037
	Fluency	**Description**	**Good**	**Very Good**
		Mean	3.73	3.93
		SD	0.47	.053
	Comprehension	**Description**	**Good**	**Very Good**
		Mean	3.02	3.33
		SD	0.49	0.49
	Overall	**Description**	**Good**	**Good**
Legend:	*4.51-5.00* *Excellent*	*1.51-2.50* *Fair*		
	3.51-4.50 *Very Good*	*1.00-1.50* *Poor*		
	2.51-3.50 *Good*			

Moreover, an improvement in student participants' English-speaking skills is observed after being subjected to Socratic questioning. This improvement is evident in the participants' posttest rating, where vocabulary (3.73), fluency (2.88) and comprehension (3.93) were rated as "Very Good" after the implementation of the intervention. Although the two areas, such as pronunciation (2.78) and grammar (3.33), are rated as good, it also shows an improvement as revealed in their mean rates. Hence, the overall mean also increased from pretest (3.02) to posttest (3.33).

Table 2.

Result of the Test of Difference in the Students' Performance of Socratic questioning Before and After the Intervention

Dependent Variable		Socratic Questioning			
		Pretest	**Posttest**	**t**	**p**
English Speaking Skills	Overall Mean	**2.97**	**3.33**	**8.391***	**.000**
	SD	**.049**	**.049**		

*Significant at 0.05 level.

Table 2 presents the score difference of the student's performance of Socratic questioning before and after the intervention. The figures reveal that participants being subjected to Socratic questioning strategy (t=8.391, p=.000) is significant to their English-speaking skills before (2.97) and after (3.33) the intervention. This improvement in students' performance confirms the researcher's observations in his virtual class during synchronous learning with his students where before the intervention, the students are just likely expressing few sentences when they are asked with their ideas; their pronunciation is likely to be not spontaneous as sound patterns from their Cebuano Visayan Language are traceable, their grammar is likely unstructured where the use of tenses and subject-verb agreement are sporadically erroneous which makes their verbal responses unintelligible, and they have had the tendency to shift from their native language for them to express their ideas and content fully. These observations were then improved when the researcher utilized the Socratic questioning as a strategy and approach when discussing his lessons. Accordingly, during the Socratic questioning implementation, the researcher lets his students be actively engaged in his discussions by asking them a question from the beginning, middle, and ending of the lecture, which requires each of them to generate answers. Also, Socratic Questioning is employed during students' speaking-related tasks such as reporting, oral recitations, oral revalidation, interviews, picture analysis activity, impromptu and extemporaneous speeches. With these tasks, students were required to share to class their viewpoints of the lesson, after which the teacher posed questions that let them elaborate their ideas to keep focused on their elements of thought, systems of thought, and standards of thought. These processes were facilitated using open-ended collaborative discussions and dialogues where students are responding with a shred of textual pieces of evidence and references to support their point or thesis. Likewise, they were as well provided with examples and deep discussions to bring in them the thinking of the standard of Paul's (2001) model on the principles of Socratic questioning such as questions for clarification,

questions that probe assumptions, questions that probe reasons and evidence, questions about viewpoints and perspectives, questions that probe implications and consequences, and questions about the question. Follow-up questions are employed to cross-check the depth of their verbal responses. This was nonetheless used to measure the students' expressive language of speaking, particularly on its relevance, fairness, clarity, and precision, to name a few. With the implementation of Socratic Questioning for eight weeks, students' active engagement in synchronous learning is evident. During synchronous learning, the researcher observed that students are now conscious of their pronunciation and correct grammar usage. They listened well to the teacher and would have to ask back when they seemed not to understand the lesson during the discussion. They, too, are now asking back the teacher when they are not able to understand the question being asked from them, which calls then for the teacher to rephrase and paraphrase the question for clarity and intelligibility. It was also observed that when they are asking back their teacher, they wanted to have an assurance that they had comprehended the question raised to them.

Furthermore, during speaking related activities, it was also confirmed by the researcher that they are likely to substantiate their ideas by only talking to what is being asked from them. In a nutshell, this modelling of practice in soliciting verbal responses to students supports Copeland (2005) and Paul's assertion (2006) espousing that these activities fueled with the approach of Socratic questioning bring students an in-depth examination and understanding of their ideas and content on how they rationalize and respond to questions. Ross (2003) further explains that these activities, such as mentioned above, captured the Socratic method's very essence in examining the values, principles, and beliefs of students to let them be expressive orally.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Evidently, Socratic questioning helped improve students' English-speaking skills such as pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension. The result of this study confirms Paul's (2001) model of Socratic questioning, stressing that by working through an organized procedure of framing questions during discussions and other oral related activities, learners are disciplined and trained to speak and reason. This finding recommends that teachers, when having a synchronous meeting with their students, may have to utilize Socratic questioning to develop student's skills in speaking and enliven their participation in online learning.

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