



Socratic Method: Its Role In The Cognitive Domain Of Bloom's Taxonomy And Its Use In Advanced ELT Literature Classes To Teach Plato's *Republic*

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Abstract

Socrates has been a very important figure not only in the field of philosophy but also in other specific fields such as literature and education. He developed *Socratic Method* or the method of *dialectic* which was based upon a process of questions and answers so as to reach the truth. Since the 4th century B.C., the ability to question has been considered an important strategy in order to gather the most correct pieces of information and an important part of the cognitive domain of the taxonomy made by Benjamin Bloom. The aim of this paper is to state the importance of Socratic Method and indicate its significant place in the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives and its role in advanced ELT literature classes while teaching Plato's *Republic*.

Key words: Socratic Method, Bloom's Taxonomy, teaching literature in ELT classes

Özet

Sokrates hem felsefe alanında hem de edebiyat ve eğitim gibi diğer alanlarda önemli bir figürdür. Sokratik Yöntem ya da diyalektik yöntem denilen ve doğruya ulaşmak için sorulan bir dizi soru ve cevaptan oluşan yöntemi geliştirmiştir. Milattan önce 4. yüzyıldan bu yana, soru sorma becerisi en doğru bilgiye ulaşmak için kullanılan önemli bir strateji olarak düşünülmüş ve Benjamin Bloom tarafından yapılan sınıflandırmada da önemli bir yer tutmuştur. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Sokratik Yöntem'in önemini ve Bloom'un sınıflandırmasının Bilişsel Alan'ındaki yerini vurgulamak ve yüksek düzey İngiliz Edebiyatı sınıflarında Eflatun'un *Devlet* adlı eserini öğretmedeki önemli rolünü açığa çıkarmaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sokratik Yöntem, Bloom'un sınıflandırması, İngilizce sınıflarındaki edebiyat öğretimi

INTRODUCTION

The Cognitive Domain of Bloom's Taxonomy

With the idea stating that there is more than one type of learning, Bloom (1956) identified three domains of educational activities. The taxonomy proposed by Benjamin Bloom has been an important part of teaching no matter what the field of teaching is. This taxonomy indicated that there are three domains of learning, which are Cognitive Domain, Affective Domain and Psychomotor Domain. In the cognitive domain, six levels of learning have been identified in the learning process; namely, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation through which low-order learning (knowledge, comprehension and application) and high-order learning (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) can be achieved.

Knowledge includes remembering facts, concepts. *Comprehension* includes the ability of understanding ideas by organizing, comparing and contrasting them. *Application* is related to using new knowledge so as to solve problems in new situations. *Analysis* is examining and breaking information into different parts and it includes making inferences and finding evidence to support generalizations. *Synthesis* is related to putting together the pieces of information and illustrating the abstract relationships between them. *Evaluation* is related to presenting and defending opinions and also making judgments about a specific piece of information. This taxonomy of educational objectives by Bloom was considered as "a framework for classifying statements of what we expect or intend students to learn as

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a result of instruction" (Krathwohl, 2002: 212). However, Bloom himself thought that this taxonomy was more than a measurement tool; therefore, it could serve as a:

- means for determining the congruence of educational objectives, activities, and assessments in a unit, course or curriculum
- panorama of the range of educational possibilities against which the limited breadth and depth of any particular educational course or curriculum could be contrasted. (Krathwohl, 2002: 212)

In 1990s, a group of cognitive psychologists led by Lorin Anderson updated Bloom's Taxonomy so as to adapt it to the requirements of the 21st century. In the revised version, the categories were re-named as follows: knowledge became "remembering", comprehension became "understanding", application became "applying", analysis became "analyzing", synthesis became "evaluating" and evaluation became "creating". The main difference between these two versions is the fact that in the first version the objectives were defined as processes whereas they are defined as the acts of doing specific skills in the second version.

No matter which classification has been dealt with, both of these versions have contributed to the educational world. According to Demirel (2006), in this classification made by Bloom, all the objectives related to a specific domain has been organized from easy to more difficult and from concrete to more abstract; moreover, each level includes the one preceding it. As Tan (2007) stated, this taxonomy can contribute to the process of defining the course objectives and writing exam questions in accordance with these pre-determined objectives.

In addition to defining the course objectives, organizing the lesson content in accordance with these objectives is also very important. After defining course objectives and organizing the lesson content, evaluating is another important area in which Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives assist in the teaching process.

Both in determining the course objectives and examination questions and in planning the lesson content, questioning is one of the most important components of the courses regardless of the subject matter. Particularly, in the last three levels of this taxonomy; namely, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, which are considered as "high-order learning" by Whiteley (2006), the ability to question has got a significant place. In almost all courses, questioning constitutes a very important part of the lesson because it can strengthen students' learning and it fosters the rapport between the teacher and the learners. Moreover, King (1995) and Taba (1966) indicate that the level of thinking occurring is influenced by the level of questions asked. (cited in Yang, Newby and Bill (2005)). Yang, Newby and Bill also point out that the ability to ask thoughtful questions has a very important role in understanding students' higher-level cognitive processes such as self-reflection, revision, social negotiation, and conceptual change of student misconceptions. Richard Paul (2002:3) also believed in the necessity of questioning in human life and stated that "*a mind with no questions is a mind that is not intellectually alive and it is not possible to be a good thinker and a poor questioner*".

Socratic questioning is one of the most popular and powerful teaching approaches which can be preferred so as to teach students how to generate thoughtful questions and thus, which is helpful for improving critical thinking skills.

Socratic Method

In order to be able to comprehend what is exactly meant by "*Socratic Questioning*", it is necessary to be familiar with his era and the ideas for which he was executed. In a period dominated by the developing seeds of democracy in Athens, Socrates believed in the necessity of educating man and revealing his inherent capacity to become better and to make the world a better place. As Versenyi (1963) indicated, the improvement and education of man, cultivation of human excellence and promoting the art of living were the basic concerns of Socrates and his way of thinking. As a part of his belief emphasizing the significance of education in man's life, he developed his dialectic method. The main purpose of Socrates in developing his dialectic method was to provide the moral cultivation of man. May (2000) claims that Socratic Method has got a central role in the formation of some essential concepts in human life such as self-knowledge, morality and happiness.

Socrates' method of questioning or *dialectic method* includes discussion in which a great number of questions which force the participants to have some further thought and analysis on the topic discussed occurs. The process of questioning goes on until an adequate response is gathered with the help of examples and additional cases. The main purpose of asking endless questions is "to arouse curiosity, and at the same time to serve as a logical, incremental, step-wise guide that enables students to figure out about a complex topic or issue with their own thinking and insights" (Garlikov, 2007). In the same manner, Maxwell (2009) emphasizes the importance of Socratic Method and states that "the ultimate goal of the Socratic Method is to increase understanding through inquiry". With the help of this method, the interlocutors are invited to rethink about the meanings of certain concepts after having their previously existing ideas discarded with their full agreement on the basis of their own answers to the questions.

The importance of asking numerous questions to people so as to teach them something was also dwelled upon in Socrates' one of the most important dialogues "Economics" written by Xenophon. In this dialogue he says "Can it be, Ischomachus, that asking questions is teaching? I am just beginning to see what is behind all your questions. You lead me on by means of things I know, point to things that resemble them, and persuade me that I know things that I thought I had no knowledge of." (Dyden, 1979:35). As can be understood from this extract, asking questions is a very powerful way of teaching. In Socratic terms, "knowledge is virtue" and true virtue in human life can be gathered via asking different questions with a view to reaching the most correct knowledge.

Just like Socrates, who tried to refine his students' thoughts about certain issues, the teacher in the class also tries to make his students realize unclear and erroneous points in their ideas. In this sense, Socratic questioning can be considered a kind of reflective thinking aloud with the emphasis given to examining reasons, evidence, assumptions and implications of an issue and acknowledging the objections in a more systematic way. The chain of questions continues since the answers of every question asked create new questions. Questioning constitutes an essential part of classroom experience; therefore, Socratic questioning can be adapted to nearly every part of the lesson.

Garlikov (2009) points out that Socratic Method is a profoundly useful tool to facilitate improvements in critical thinking and to elevate the quality of human discourse regarding difficult and controversial issues. Yang, Newby and Bill (2005) claim that Socratic questioning stimulates students' minds by continually probing into the subject with numerous questions and they are able to exchange ideas with the other interlocutors, give new meaning to content, look for solutions to problems and make them ready for real life situations.

In the same manner, Paraskevas and Wickens (2003:5) call this process "Socratic Seminars" and state that "this process is assumed to help emphasize learning by placing students in the position of having to recognize the limits of their knowledge, and hopefully, motivating them to learn."

As can be understood from all the ideas, Socratic Method in the classroom is considered an efficient tool making the classroom interaction possible between students and between students and the teacher. With the help of this technique, students have a very active role and the teacher facilitates the process of learning with his/her guidance throughout the lesson.

How to Benefit from Socratic Questioning in Advanced ELT Literature Classes to Teach Plato's Republic

Republic by Plato is one of the most influential works of its time in which through Socrates' dialogues with many participants, the features of an idealized society and the importance of education were highlighted. Being one of the most important representatives of utopian literature, **Republic** can be used to make advanced learners of English familiar with authentic pieces of language in ELT classes. Since this work is very rich with regards to philosophical themes and literary value, it is very convenient for classroom discussion. Students must be familiar with the time period in which this dialogue was written so as to interpret the characters occurring in the play and their functions.

In the classroom, especially when there is a debatable issue, Socratic questioning is an effective way of dealing with the subject matter. In order to teach students good thinking, Socratic Method is a good technique. When focused questions are asked, the discussions in the class become significant and stimulating. According to Paul and Elder (2002), some basic types of questions might be asked in the classes where Socratic questioning is applied. These

questions can be questions for clarification, questions about assumptions, questions about reasons, questions about evidence, and questions about implications.

Questioning can take place either between the teacher and the students or between the students themselves. Students might take turns while practicing Socratic questioning in the class or some students might just observe the other students and provide feedback. Sample questions might be:

- What is an idealized government system? (question for clarification)
- What is the significance of education in human life? (question for clarification)
- What are the possible reasons for people's greed and hatred? Can it be the existence of private property in the society? (question about reason) (for further discussion)
- What is real justice?
- What do you think about the concept of "justice" in *Republic*? Is it similar to your own definition of justice?
- What do you think about banishing the poets from the society?
- Could you evaluate this literary work from a feminist point of view?
- Is it possible to mention "equality" in the society portrayed in *Republic*?

When these questions are answered, further questions are added to deal with every side of the argument sufficiently. These further questions might be:

- What are you basing this comment on? (pursuing relevant information)
- How did you reach that conclusion? Could you explain your reasoning? Is there another possible interpretation? (appropriate inferences, interpretations and conclusions)
- What exactly are you taking for granted here? Why are you assuming that? (questionable assumptions)
- What are you implying when you say? Are you implying that? If people accepted your conclusion, and then acted upon it, what implications might follow? (implications and consequences)
- From what point of view are you looking at this? Is there another point of view we should consider? (calling attention to point-of-view)
- Tell us more about the situation that has given rise to this problem. What was going on in this situation? (clarification of context)
- Could you elaborate further on what you are saying? Could you give me an example of illustration of your point? Let me tell you what I understand you to be saying? Is my interpretation correct? (for clarification)
- Could you specify your allegations more fully? (for precision)

With the help of these further questions, all the points of discussion can be dwelled upon and students can find the chance of understanding the parts which seem to be challenging.

Dilworth, Jr. (1980:43) claims that "*the teacher of English functions as a textual critic and students will best learn when to understand and judge literature by witnessing the teacher's considered response to specific works*". Therefore, it is possible to state that the teacher is taken as example by the students in the evaluation and interpretation of literary works.

The questions prepared and asked by the teacher in the literature class can be concerned with the formal, rhetorical and semantic aspects of the text studied. In an English class of literature, the lesson can start with some literal questions assisting students in understanding the form and the content of the text such as:

- What is the form of the work?
- What is the time and place in the text?
- Who are the main characters and what is their function in the story?
- What are the main themes highlighted in throughout the text?

After dealing with the mechanics of the texts studied in order to have a general understanding of it, it is time to go into detail with the help of Socratic questions when the main themes and messages of the text are studied. In this session, the level of the questions asked is critically higher than the ones asked at the beginning of the lesson. This part of the classroom work has a great potential for making the students' personal responses appear. At this point, Dilworth, Jr. (1980:44) points out that "*the teacher gently probes and encourages students' personal responses by posing questions and propositions structured according to the psychology of the individual reader rather than according to the logic of critical heuristics*". The main purpose here is to develop the students' ability to gain insight from the literature and to make them gain sensitivity.

As can clearly be seen, the questions in the lesson are organized taxonomically, which is appropriate for the nature of the literary works. Dilworth, Jr. (1980:46) mentions a taxonomical process including different steps around which the organization of the questions in the lesson might be determined. The organization of the questions to be asked while teaching Plato's *Republic* might be in the following way:

1. *Literal Comprehension –Recognition*: In the first two parts of *Republic*, What is Socrates' description of "justice"?
2. *Literal Comprehension –Recall*: How is this definition developed in the rest of the text?
3. *Reorganization*: Summarize the main characteristics of the ideal government system suggested by Socrates.
4. *Inference*: What is your assumption about the attitude of Socrates towards women in the society?
5. *Evaluation*: Was Socrates right when he stated that poets must be banished from the society?
6. *Appreciation*: Do you like the way Plato adopted while describing this ideal government? Give some examples from the specific features you particularly liked.

Particularly, in the last three steps of this kind of analysis, benefiting from Socratic questioning might be a good idea because in these parts the students are able to use the important components of Socratic questioning such as inferences, assumptions, evaluation, cause-effect relationships and personal appreciation and also, they require higher-level of thinking, which is, in fact, one of the most important aims of teaching literature. Moreover, the last three steps are very identical to what Bloom described in his "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain". Literal questions asked at the beginning of the lesson are very similar to the processes described in the first three levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, which are *knowledge*, *comprehension* and *application*. The last three levels; namely, analysis, synthesis and evaluation are very similar to *inference*, *evaluation* and *appreciation* in the model suggested by Dilworth, Jr.

The Contribution of Socratic Method to the Enhancement of Critical Thinking Skills

In developing people's astute thinking skills, the main practice is believed to have occurred in ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. With the help of the dialogue form adopted by many people at that time, young people were forced to evaluate every aspect of their thoughts regardless of the content so as to reach the most accurate form of knowledge. Scanlan (2006: 4) states that "*the history of Critical Thinking (CT) starts with Socrates who introduced a method of inquiry in which he examined his antagonists with probing questions designed to challenge their epistemological foundations*".

Critical Thinking Skills, which include thinking clearly, reading critically and speaking effectively (Baker, 1981), can be adapted to advanced ELT literature classes with the help of using Socratic questions in order to deal with Socratic dialogues. When the students deal with the texts, they focus on some important concepts emphasized in the text. In Plato's *Republic*, for instance, they create discussions so as to highlight the meanings of "justice", "equality", and "ideal government system" and then they exchange a number of questions asking about how they reached these conclusions, what they base their ideas on and how they can elaborate these arguments. With the help of these questions, they find the opportunity to increase the clarity of their arguments and to improve their critical reading skills. What is more, when they try to express their opinions clearly, they will need to speak effectively; therefore, this practice improves their speaking skills.

With the emphasis of these skills, the students turn into active communicators, who are open-minded, patient and competent. They identify the problems, assess their sources and generate possible solutions. Nicoteri (1998)

contends that critical thinkers asks endless questions and always keep their goals in sight, which is, in fact, an indispensable part of the Socratic questioning.

Teacher's Role in the Practice of Socratic Method

The main purpose of Socratic approach is to make students re-examine what they believe, not present them absolute information. (Magee, 2001) The most important part of the teacher's role is to emphasize with the student by understanding the problems faced by the students and to guide them in the whole process of learning. (Magee, 2001)

Another important aim in Socratic Method is to engage the students in critical thinking; therefore, it requires a facilitator who is knowledgeable on the topic discussed. In order to benefit from the advantages of this method as much as possible in the class, Merritts and Walter, (t.y.:2) indicate the following guidelines: 1) plan ahead by having significant questions ready so as to provide structure and direction during the discussion. 2) make sure the questions are phrased clearly and specifically. 3) allow the student 5-10 seconds to respond to the question. 4) follow up on student responses and seek elaboration. 5) keep the discussion focused. 6) engage the students in a stimulating discussion by asking probing questions. 7) present a summary of the points discussed. 8) engage as many students as possible in the discussion. 9) promote critical thinking by avoiding questions requiring only "yes/no" answers. 10) avoid questions that are vague, ambiguous, or too advanced for the students.

CONCLUSION

No matter what the subject matter is, Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives related to the Cognitive Domain can be applied in the classes. These six levels clarified in the taxonomy shed light on not only course objectives but also questions asked both in the classroom discussions and in the examinations or other assessment techniques.

Socratic Questioning, one of the oldest methods of teaching, can be adapted to the taxonomy made by Benjamin Bloom, especially emphasizing the importance of the last three levels. In the teaching of Plato's *Republic*, which is considered one of the most examples in which Socratic questioning was practiced, asking appropriate questions in different levels, which will lead the students to think of the main themes appearing throughout the text, will make the advanced ELT literature classrooms more fruitful in terms of improving students' critical and reflective thinking skills. Since critical thinking skills are considered essential owing to their potential for making the evaluation of the authors' ideas possible and skimming and scanning abilities simultaneously, fostering them can be beneficial in terms of the outcomes of the ELT literature classes.

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