

# TEACHING WORLD LANGUAGE LIKE SOCRATES WITH SPECIAL PERSON INTERVIEWS

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*Text from the Project Gutenberg eBook **Meno**, by Plato*  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1643/1643-h/1643-h.htm>

Asking students a series of purposeful questions and follow-up questions supercharges learning. It engages them and drives acquisition of language and complex ideas like nothing else. Plato modeled this technique brilliantly in Socrates' dialogues. *Special Person* student interviews are similar to Socratic teaching. It is asking questions with a point in mind. Socratic questioning can be used as an expansion and refinement of the TPRS idea of **circling** to engage and guide students in meaningful dialogue as they acquire language.

Socratic teaching is a respected method and has been used for millennia. Socratic seminars are a good way of organizing instruction, and can be helpful, but why not learn Socratic teaching from Socrates himself?

Socratic teaching guides student learning with calculated questions. It is expanding the student's mind through query and discussion rather than by explaining or direct instruction. Socratic teaching allows the student to discover the answers instead of having every detail spelled out — **and it works remarkably well with world language instruction.**

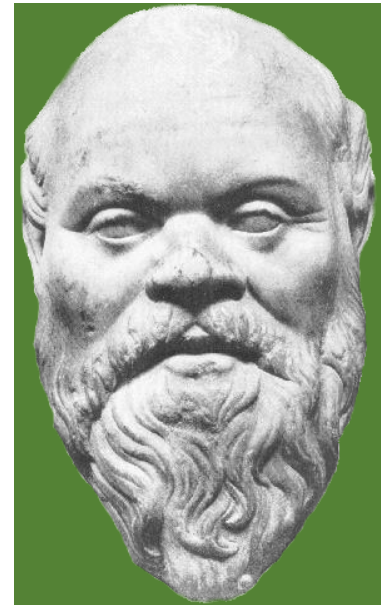
In Plato's writings, Socrates uses this method to examine philosophical presuppositions, but in the example below, he uses guided questioning to get an unschooled boy to discover a geometry concept. It works for philosophy. It works for mathematics. And it works for teaching language. Students can acquire language when the teacher uses familiar vocabulary and grammar repeatedly, but with slightly different shades of meaning.

Socratic teaching uses well-thought-out sets of questions that are designed so as to lead the students to an idea. By using questions, the teacher has the opportunity to get students engaged and excited.

Reading Plato is not always hard. Reading complicated explanations about Plato is hard. This isn't going to be hard. In this short excerpt, Plato's master, Socrates, is modeling teaching with questions in the book **Meno**. This is the first example of classic Socratic questioning in Plato's writings.

In this example from the middle of *Meno*, Socrates asserts that all learning is nothing but recollection. He uses an unschooled slave boy to prove the point by asking him a series of questions about a geometry problem.

I have added graphics to help make the mathematical meaning clear if this is your first time reading this piece.



We may have a hard time believing that Socrates' assertion that ***we already know everything and just need to be reminded***, but as I will explain later, that's not always a bad way to approach teaching and learning — “reminding” versus telling allows students to save face and it is less threatening — it lowers the affective filter, or emotional barriers to learning.

**Green Highlighting =** Key Points made by Socrates in the dialogue  
**Red Highlighting =** Socrates' Questions to the slave boy  
**Maroon Highlighting =** Answers by the slave boy (with question type in parentheses)  
**Blue Highlighting =** Commentary

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### **MENO AND SOCRATES DISCUSS WHAT LEARNING IS**

MENO: Yes, Socrates; but **what do you mean by saying that we do not learn, and that what we call learning is only a process of recollection?** Can you teach me how this is?

SOCRATES: I told you, Meno, just now that you were a rogue, and now you ask whether I can teach you, when I am saying that there is no teaching, but only recollection; and thus, you imagine that you will involve me in a contradiction.

MENO: Indeed, Socrates, I protest that I had no such intention. I only asked the question from habit; but if you can prove to me that what you say is true, I wish that you would.

SOCRATES: It will be no easy matter, but I will try to please you to the utmost of my power. Suppose that you call one of your numerous attendants, that I may demonstrate on him.

MENO: Certainly. Come hither, boy.

SOCRATES: He is Greek, and speaks Greek, does he not?

MENO: Yes, indeed; he was born in the house.

SOCRATES: Attend now to the questions which I ask him, and **observe whether he learns of me or only remembers.**  
*(See the end of this essay for a discussion of this idea.)*

MENO: I will.

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### **SOCRATES TO THE UNNAMED SLAVE BOY:**

SOCRATES: **Q#1: Y/N?** Tell me, boy, **do you know that a figure like this is a square?**

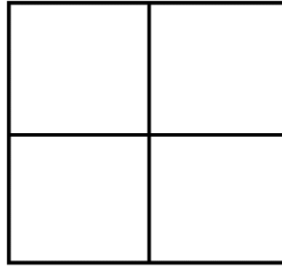


BOY: I do. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#2: Y/N?** And **you know that a square figure has these four lines equal?**

BOY:

Certainly.

**(Yes)**SOCRATES: **Q#3: Y/N?**And **these lines** which I have drawn through the middle of the square are also equal?

BOY:

Yes.

**(Yes)**SOCRATES: **Q#4: Y/N?**

A square may be of any size?

BOY:

Certainly.

**(Yes)**

**COMMENT:** This ↓ is the 1<sup>st</sup> FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT question — The student does not answer, indicating that he does not understand much of anything at this point.

SOCRATES: **Q#5: How much?**And if one side of the figure be of two feet, and the other side be of two feet; **how much will the whole be?** **(No answer)**SOCRATES: **Q#6: Y/N?**Let me explain: If in one direction the space was of two feet, and in the other direction of one foot, **the whole would be of two feet taken once?**

BOY:

Yes.

**(Yes)**SOCRATES: **Q#7: Y/N?**But since this side is also of two feet, **there are twice two feet?**

BOY:

There are.

**(Yes)**SOCRATES: **Q#8: Y/N?**Then **the square is of twice two feet?**

BOY:

Yes.

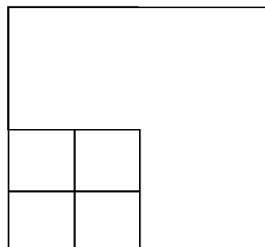
**(Yes)**

**COMMENT:** This is a follow-up to the first formative assessment question

SOCRATES: **Q#9: How many?**And **how many are twice two feet?** count and tell me.

BOY:

Four, Socrates.

**(Answers with a number)**SOCRATES: **Q#10: Y/N?**And **might there not be another square twice as large as this**, and having like this the lines equal?

BOY:

Yes.

**(Yes)**

**COMMENT:** There have been 10 comprehension check questions (mostly Y/N) so far. Below ↓ are the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT questions that Socrates asks—and the student fails miserably — He thinks he knows, but he doesn't — still, he is engaged, which is a plus. Checking for understanding and connecting with questions does that.

SOCRATES: **Q#11: How many?** And of **how many feet will that be?**  
 BOY: Eight feet. **(Answers with a number)**  
 SOCRATES: And now try and tell me the length of the line which forms the side of that double square: this is two feet—  
**Q#12: What?** What will that be?  
 BOY: Clearly, Socrates, it will be double. **(Answers with a number)**

### **SOCRATES BREAKS TO DISCUSS THE LESSON WITH MENO**

SOCRATES: Do you observe, Meno, that **I am not teaching the boy anything, but only asking him questions;** and **now he fancies that he knows** how long a line is necessary in order to produce a figure of eight square feet; does he not?  
 MENO: Yes.  
 SOCRATES: And **does he really know?**  
 MENO: Certainly not.  
 SOCRATES: **He only guesses** that because the square is double, the line is double.

**COMMENTS:** The student has partial knowledge. He thinks he has complete understanding of the concept. This shows that doing just a few comprehension checks is NOT ENOUGH. We need to keep on asking questions. Too few questions, or questions that do not require students to produce at least simple answers, can lure both you and your students into thinking that they understand—when they don't. Only further, more detailed, guided comprehension check questions will let you know if students understand for sure.

With skill, comprehension check questions with simple answers can become a form of comprehensible input—you are checking to be sure the students actually understand, and are not just pretending. Ideally, this should be the case: the comprehensible input should not stop. Even checking for understanding and assessments can become opportunities to give more input.

MENO: True.  
 SOCRATES: Observe him while he recalls the steps in regular order.

### **SOCRATES TO THE SLAVE BOY:**

SOCRATES: **Q#13: Y/N?** Tell me, boy, **do you assert that a double space comes**

from a double line? Remember that I am not speaking of an oblong, but of a figure equal every way, and twice the size of this—that is to say of eight feet;

**(Yes verbal answer is inferred)**

SOCRATES: **Q#14: Y/N?**

And I want to know whether you still say that a double square comes from double line?

BOY:

Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#15: Y/N?**

But does not this line become doubled if we add another such line here?

BOY:

Certainly. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#16: Y/N?**

And four such lines will make a space containing eight feet?

BOY:

Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES:

Let us describe such a figure:

**Q#17: Y/N?**

Would you not say that this is the figure of eight feet?

BOY:

Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#18: Y/N?**

of which is

And are there not these four divisions in the figure, each

equal to the figure of four feet?

BOY:

True. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#19: Y/N?**

And is not that four times four?

BOY:

Certainly. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#20: Y/N?**

And four times is not double?

BOY:

No, indeed. **(No)**

SOCRATES: **Q#21: How much?**

But How much?

BOY:

Four times as much. **(Answer with a number)**

SOCRATES: **Q#22: Y/N?**

Therefore, the double line, boy, has given a space, not twice, but four times as much.

BOY:

True. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#23: Y/N?**

Four times four are sixteen—are they not?

BOY:

Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES:

What line would give you a space of eight feet, as this gives one of sixteen feet;

**Q#24: Y/N?**

Do you see?

BOY:

Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#25: Y/N?**

And the space of four feet is made from this half line?

BOY:

Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#26: Y/N?**

Good; and is not a space of eight feet twice the size of this, and half the size of the other?

BOY:

Certainly. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#27: Y/N?**

Such a space, then, will be made out of a line greater than this one, and less than that one?

BOY:

Yes; I think so. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES:

Very good; I like to hear you say what you think. And now



BOY: **Q#28: Y/N?** tell me, **Is not this a line of two feet and that of four?**  
 SOCRATES: **Q#29: Y/N?** Yes. **(Yes)**  
 BOY: Then the line which forms the side of eight feet ought to  
 SOCRATES: **Q#30: How much?** be more than this line of two feet, and less than the other  
 BOY: It ought. **(Yes)** of four feet?  
 SOCRATES: Try and see if you can tell me **How much it will be?**  
 BOY: Three feet. **(Answer with a number)**  
 SOCRATES: Then if we add a half to this line of two, that will be the  
 BOY: **Q#31: Y/N?** line of three. Here are two and there is one; and on the  
 SOCRATES: That makes the figure of which you speak? **(Yes)**  
 BOY: Yes. **(Yes)**  
 SOCRATES: But if there are three feet this way and three feet that  
 BOY: **Q#32: Y/N?** way, **The whole space will be three times three feet?**  
 SOCRATES: That is evident. **(Yes)**  
 BOY: **Q#33: How much?** And **How much are three times three feet?**  
 SOCRATES: **Q#34: How much?** Nine. **(Answer with a number)**  
 BOY: **Q#35: Y/N?** And **how much is the double of four?**  
 SOCRATES: Eight. **(Answer with a number)**  
 BOY: Then **the figure of eight is not made out of a line of three?**  
 SOCRATES: No. **(No)**

**COMMENT:** This ↓ is another FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: “Tell me.” “Show me.”

SOCRATES: **Q#36: What?** But from what line? **(No answer)**  
**Q#37: Tell me/Show me** Tell me exactly; and if you would rather not  
 reckon, try and  
**Q#38: Show me** Show me the line.  
 BOY: Indeed, Socrates, I do not know. **(Cannot answer with a number, nor with a demonstration)**

### SOCRATES BREAKS TO DISCUSS THE LESSON WITH MENO

SOCRATES: Do you see, Meno, what advances he has made in his power of recollection?  
**He did not know at first, and he does not know now**, what is the side of a  
 figure of eight feet: **but then he thought that he knew**, and answered  
 confidently as if he knew, and had no difficulty; **now he has a difficulty, and  
 neither knows nor fancies that he knows.**  
 MENO: True.  
 SOCRATES: Is he not better off in knowing his ignorance?

MENO: I think that he is.

SOCRATES: If we have made him doubt, and given him the 'torpedo's shock,' have we done him any harm?

MENO: I think not.

SOCRATES: We have certainly, as would seem, assisted him in some degree to the discovery of the truth; and **now he will wish to remedy his ignorance**, but then he would have been ready to tell all the world again and again that the double space should have a double side.

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: But do you suppose that he would ever have enquired into or learned what he fancied that he knew, though he was really ignorant of it, until he had fallen into perplexity under the idea that he did not know, and had desired to know?

MENO: I think not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then he was the better for the torpedo's touch?

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: Mark now the farther development. **I shall only ask him, and not teach him**, and he shall share the enquiry with me: and do you watch and **see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion.**

**COMMENTS:** The assertion "I shall only ask him, and not teach him," is claiming too much. Socrates is leading the slave boy with guided questions. Every bit of the conversation is guided. Every question is leading to deeper understanding. Socrates has a definite end in mind. The steps are so small and logical that it does not feel like teaching or learning, but the boy is definitely being led. You can accomplish nearly the same thing with skillful Special Person questions.

The idea of engaging students with questions so that they feel listened to is extremely powerful. The continual questions make the students feel like we are merely asking for their opinions. This is the core of Special Person interviews.

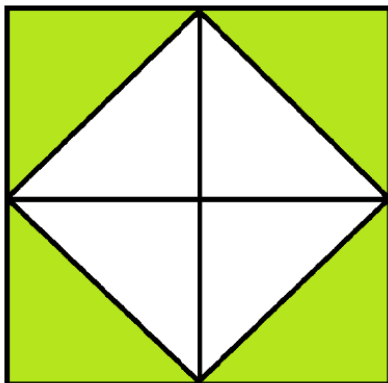
### **SOCRATES TO THE SLAVE BOY:**

SOCRATES: Tell me, boy, **Q#39: Y/N?** Is not this a square of four feet which I have drawn?

BOY:

Yes.

**(Yes)**



**COMMENTS:**

Each triangle is a 1, 1, square root of 2 triangle; a 45°, 45°, 90° triangle.

All 8 triangles (4 white, 4 green) are the same size.



SOCRATES: **Q#40: Y/N?** And now I add another square equal to the former one?  
 BOY: Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#41: Y/N?** And a third, which is equal to either of them?  
 BOY: Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#42: Y/N?** Suppose that we fill up the vacant corner?  
 BOY: Very good. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#43: Y/N?** Here, then, there are four equal spaces?  
 BOY: Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#44: How many?** And How many times larger is this space than this other?  
 BOY: Four times. **(Answer with a number)**

SOCRATES: **Q#45: Y/N?** But it ought to have been twice only, as you will remember.  
 BOY: True. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#46: Y/N?** And does not this line, reaching from corner to corner, bisect each of these spaces?  
 BOY: Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#47: Y/N?** And are there not here four equal lines which contain this space?  
 BOY: There are. **(Yes)**

**COMMENTS:** This ↓ is another formative assessment, but more advanced than the previous one. It is close to a summative assessment for this lesson—because if he gets this question, he gets the whole lesson: He will be able to answer the Tell me/Show me questions.

SOCRATES: **Q#48: How much?** Look and see how much this space is.  
 BOY: I do not understand. **(No answer)**

**COMMENTS:** The student does not understand the question, so another round of questions ensues to lead him where he needs to be.

SOCRATES: **Q#49: Y/N?** Has not each interior line cut off half of the four spaces?  
 BOY: Yes. **(Yes)**

SOCRATES: **Q#50: How many?** And how many spaces are there in this section?  
 BOY: Four. **(Answer with a number)**

SOCRATES: **Q#51: How many?** And how many in this?  
 BOY: Two. **(Answer with a number)**

SOCRATES: **Q#52: How many?** And four is how many times two?  
 BOY: Twice. **(Answer with a number)**

SOCRATES: **Q#53: How many?** And this space is of how many feet?  
 BOY: Of eight feet. **(Answer with a number)**

SOCRATES: **Q#54: What?** And from what line do you get this figure?  
 BOY: From this. **(Demonstration)**





SOCRATES: **Q#55: Y/N?**

That is, from the line which extends from corner to corner of the figure of four feet?

BOY:

Yes.

**(Yes)**

SOCRATES:

And that is the line which the learned call the diagonal.

And if this is the proper name, then you, Meno's slave, are prepared to affirm that

**Q#56: Y/N?**

the double space is the square of the diagonal?

BOY:

Certainly, Socrates.

**(Yes)**

**COMMENTS:** Socrates has guided the learning with 56 total questions. Most of them were Yes/No questions.

38 Y/N Questions

'Yes' answers

36

'No' answers

2

How much? How many?

13

What?

2

Demonstration (Show me/Tell me)

3

56

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### **SUMMARY: SOCRATES WITH MENO**

SOCRATES: What do you say of him, Meno? **Were not all these answers given out of his own head?**

MENO: Yes, they were all his own.

SOCRATES: And yet, as we were just now saying, he did not know?

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: But still he had in him those notions of his—had he not?

MENO: Yes.

**COMMENT:** This is not an inevitable conclusion. The understanding was NOT completely within him. The slave boy was led by questions in incremental steps. The questions guided him while he absorbed the understanding. Each guided question prepared him for the next level. This is similar to Stephen Krashen's idea of **i + 1**, what is currently understood, plus a little bit beyond, so that students can infer the meaning and make small steps toward more complete understanding with context and a little nudge.

SOCRATES: Then **he who does not know may still have true notions of that which he does not know?**

MENO: He has.

SOCRATES: And at present these notions have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream; but **if he were frequently asked the same questions, in different forms, he would know as well as any one at last?**



MENO: I dare say.

SOCRATES: **Without any one teaching him he will recover his knowledge for himself, if he is only asked questions?**

MENO: Yes.

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**COMMENTS:** Socrates claims that all of us already possess all knowledge. In language acquisition, we do indeed have a certain amount of deep knowledge of language, what Chomsky described as universal grammar, which seems almost instinctive in humans when it comes to language acquisition.

Socrates here does not account for partial knowledge, some limited background knowledge, or the ability to reason, all of which can explain how students can make eventual gains in understanding by means of incremental steps. Stephen Krashen accounted for this with his idea of “ $i + 1$ ”: that student language grows when the level of input is just slightly above the current level of acquisition, so that new meaning can be inferred in small steps from prior knowledge.

And yet... acting as if students already know is not a bad idea. It allows them to save face. If they do not know, or do not understand, or have forgotten, or were just not paying attention, let them act as if they already knew something about it, and you are just reminding them.

This is an idea that has been apprehended in the past as a good way to teach:

**“Men must be taught as if you taught them not,  
and things unknown proposed as things forgot.”**

—Alexander Pope (1688-1744) English poet

If you tell students they are wrong all the time you will not make them want to listen to you. You inadvertently tell them they are wrong in at least five ways:

- 1) with your words,
- 2) with your facial expressions,
- 3) with your voice intonations,
- 4) your lack of enthusiasm for their answers, and
- 5) with you subtly, even unconsciously, rolling eyes.

**Stop doing that.** Quit telling them they are wrong all the time. Find something they are doing right in their answers. Catch them being good. Show them that you are listening to what they are saying and reflect back to them what you have gathered from their responses.

Very few people are completely logical. Most of us are biased in favor of our own opinions. If students are frequently told they are wrong, they tend to harden their hearts. They resent it. We threaten their self-esteem. If you tell them they are wrong, they will look for arguments in favor of believing and acting the way they already do.



Quit contradicting the way they are expressing themselves. Give positive assertions. Don't negate what they say. Affirm what they feel and what they are trying to express. Make them get the sense that you are listening to them.

Rephrase students' misstatements with, "I imagine that you..." or "It seems like you..." saying everything with correct grammar in the target language. You want to show that you are listening and engaging with the student, not correcting their grammar. You want to understand them, not correct them. If you keep on correcting them, they will quit talking to you.

The student needs to feel as if the lesson is a conversation, the teacher is fully aware of what is happening.

## **The Take-Aways from Socrates for Teachers**

### **The teacher needs to clearly know:**

#### **Where the lesson is going...**

- What are the steps?
- What are the potential misunderstandings?

#### **The underlying grammatical assumptions**

- What do student apprehend now?
- What are they ready to get next?

#### **What are the steps of acquisition? These steps need to:**

- Be Small
- Be Achievable
- Be Accessible with questions that feel easy
- Not feel hard
- Feel like they are being discovered by students for themselves

#### **The potential misunderstandings that students comprehend all along the way.**

- Every question is an informal comprehension check, forming the next question
- Most questions at the beginning of the lesson can be yes/no.
- Towards the end of the lesson, there are more questions with short responses.

#### **What else?**

- What would you add?