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Exploring Interactive Roles in the Communication Through Drama Online Classroom in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

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Abstract
This qualitative study aims to identify and categorise interactive roles within a Malaysian tertiary drama classroom and examine the impact of virtual interaction on students' learning experiences. Employing focus group discussions as the data collection method, it involves 20 undergraduates of the Communication Through Drama course in Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM. The study is based on the Social Constructivist theory by Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and Project Zero's Visible Thinking approach identified by Ritchhart (2006). The findings demonstrate that implementing VT routines enhances students' interactive roles and communication skills. Despite the challenges, students embrace this more interactive and student-centred environment.

Keywords: Interactive Roles, Social Constructivist, Visible Thinking, Focus Group Discussions

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of Study
Theories on the best teaching and learning approaches have evolved to suit current educational needs. One with increasing global currency is constructivism. Adhering to the constructivist theory, Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) states that the orientation of 21st-century learning emphasises developing critical and creative thinking skills and promoting learner-centredness (MoE - Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, n.d.). According to Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1962, 1978), it is critical to recognise that teaching and learning are social processes and that learning occurs through interaction. This study is driven by the fact that using drama as a tool in the language classroom does allow for interactions and the manifestation of the social constructivist approach to education, as proven in the literature of Drama in Education (DiE, henceforth). Another concern that motivates this study was the generally negative experiences of Open Distance Learning (ODL henceforth) among Malaysian tertiary students based on research, with modes of interaction and connectivity becoming the central points of discussion. Yee (2020) states that besides family responsibilities, students

with less privileged backgrounds face more challenges, including Internet access, space to study, and lack of facilities such as computers. According to Berg (2020), such limitations in ODL interactions always point towards the challenges in interaction with technology (e.g., poor internet connectivity), not necessarily with content, the lecturer, or fellow students. With this realisation, many scholars have highlighted that, ideally, the ways through which students are afforded similar opportunities for interactions (relative to face-to-face sessions) constitute a key factor in student satisfaction and the eventual successful implementation of an ODL experience (Berg, 2020). Therefore, interactive roles within the ODL drama classroom should be optimised and enhanced with the support of effective classroom practice, such as the VT thinking routines.

1.2 Problem Statement

The essence of a drama class is in creating a community and coaching the students to build a great team with empathy, active listening, and shared values (Bestock, 2020), regardless of whether it is taught as a discipline or a tool to enhance language skills under the DiE notion. Generally, he adds, teachers have been facing difficulties in conducting drama classes during the COVID-19 pandemic as it has become a great challenge to simulate a drama stage in exchange for the limited screen of a laptop. Another concern that has driven the embarkation of this study is that research on drama classrooms in the Malaysian tertiary setting is still limited, although incorporating drama activities is a potential way to promote learner interaction. Despite the generally negative feedback on ODL as reported in previous studies, one recent study by Muhammad Azri (2021) that examines Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) students' perceptions of learning Introduction to Drama and Theatre course online has found that the perception of online learning was moderate to positive. Students perceived online drama classes positively despite facing connectivity issues. They also hold a positive perception of the usage of online tools and materials. However, the students view class participation neutrally; they neither agree nor disagree (Muhammad Azri, 2021). The issues of concern discussed (from the scarcity of research related to DiE classrooms in general and specifically in its lack of focus on VT to the impact of ODL interactions, particularly in DiE classrooms) and the vast potential of VT for language learning have all motivated the researcher to carry out this study. The Research Questions (RQs) addressed are:

RQ1: What are the interactive roles manifested in the ODL drama classroom?
RQ2: How can these interactive roles be categorised based on the social constructivist and VT approaches?
RQ3: How do virtual interactions, focusing on the social constructivist and VT approaches, impact students' language
   learning experiences in the drama classroom?

Thus, this study does not only explore students' experience in the virtual drama classroom but also looks into the manifestation of the social constructivist and Visible Thinking approaches within the process.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Constructivism in Education

Dagar and Yadav (2016) state that constructivist pedagogy is one such approach where activities are proposed to students that are meaningful for them, in which the learner reflects, searches and uses his/her capacity for taking the initiative and being creative. The five basic principles of the constructivist theory can be summed up as follows: 1. learning is an active process of "meaning-making gained from experiences and interactions" 2. learning occurs when students are involved in "cognitive conflict through planned problem-solving" 3. learning is social and collaborative, 4. learning has an embedded assessment and reflection aspect, and lastly, 5. learners take responsibility for their learning (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017). Schreiber and Valle (2013) state that social constructivism posits that individuals actively participate in creating their knowledge. Vygotsky believed that learning occurs primarily in social and cultural settings rather than solely within the individual (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). One of the core constructs of Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasises the role of the instructor in an individual's learning.

In the social constructivist approach, as implemented in this study, the lecturer uses scaffolding to build new knowledge upon learners' existing ideas by providing realistic, open-ended activities in which learning is more meaningful. Collaborative learning with peers is promoted by the lecturer to develop new ideas. The social constructivist approach is to become the basis for the design of research instruments of this study, in which active roles by both students and the teacher (partly as an instructor as proposed by the ZPD) and the role of thinking are optimised in the group interactive activities. It is important to note that ODL is the mode of interaction used in the study. Social constructivism and VT are the approaches applied in the process that affect the interactive roles, either via ODL or face-to-face. However, in this study, since the data is collected using the ODL mode, the effects of having the interaction online were looked at from the students' perspective.

2.2 Project Zero (PZ) and the Visible Thinking (VT) Approach

Thinking routines are a part of Visible Thinking, which Harvard University academics and teachers worldwide have developed (Dass, 2021). PZ is a well-established classroom research model founded by philosopher Nelson Goodman at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1967 to study and improve education. It has produced numerous educational research and projects around the world, including Argentina, Australia, Colombia, Italy, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States. VT is one of the PZ core projects developed

by Ron Richhart of Harvard University in 2006. It is a flexible and systematic research-based conceptual framework that aims to integrate the development of students' thinking with content learning across subject matters.

Ritchhart and Church (2020) enlist six ways to demonstrate how thinking routine practices exert transformational change in classrooms: 1. Foster deep learning, 2. Cultivate engaged students, 3. Change the role of students and teachers, 4. Enhance our formative assessment practice, 5. Improve learning (even when measured by standardised tests), and 6. Develop thinking dispositions. In its many years of establishment, PZ has produced a list of 20 thinking routines in the VT project, each consisting of several proposed activities to be carried out by educators in many parts of the world.

To encourage students to think about something (problem, question, or topic) and articulate their thoughts in pairs, small groups, or the whole class, a routine called "Think Pair Share" was adapted by PZ in 2011. This routine promotes understanding through active reasoning and explanation, encouraging them to understand multiple perspectives by taking turns, listening carefully, and asking clarifying questions (Think Pair, Share, Project Zero, n.d). In addition, the "Ladder of Feedback" is a recently designed thinking routine in the VT project in which steps in receiving and responding to points in interactive discussions are proposed (Ladder of Feedback, Project Zero, n.d.). These two thinking routines were applied in this study in order to address the research objectives.

2.3 Drama in the Language Classroom – The applicability of the social constructivist and VT approach in the drama classroom
The incorporation of drama in the language classroom is not something new. Research in the use of drama under the DiE notion has been carried out for over 40 years. Among the pioneers were Maley and Duff (1982), who emphasised how drama helps students learn new vocabulary, builds confidence, motivates the students, and helps shift the focus from the teacher to the students. Zakhareuski (2018) advocates the incorporation of drama in English language classrooms, arguing that acting not only promotes learners' self-confidence and self-esteem but also helps eliminate speaking anxiety.

A study by Gholam (2018) gathers that in higher education, VT thinking routines encouraged students to employ cooperation, communication skills, and higher-order thinking, boosting student participation in every learning process. The exercises can be incorporated into several lessons, and the students may learn from one another. Many students claimed to have synthesised, examined, reflected and expanded their thinking (Gholam, 2018). However, most studies about VT thinking routines have only been carried out in a few areas, such as in the scope of early childhood and secondary school education. Some studies focused on how thinking routines enhance thinking skills, including critical thinking skills in elementary school (Mala et al., 2022). Thus, more research is needed on under-explored areas, such as the impact of thinking routines on students of higher education contexts, particularly in communicative drama classrooms. In short, both notions of social constructivism and Visible Thinking are chosen as the basis of this study as they highlight the role of interaction and thinking, learner-centredness, learner empowerment, and autonomy, on par with the demands of the English language policy of the country.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design
The study is qualitative in its design, as it suits the research objectives. Creswell (2018) describes qualitative research as an approach to studying and analysing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human situation. In terms of the type of research, a case study is deemed suitable for investigating a classroom discourse within the bounded system of the Malaysian tertiary education system. According to Cherry (2022), a case study is an in-depth examination of one individual, group, or event wherein practically every aspect of the subject's life and history is examined for patterns and reasons of behaviour. For this study, a single case study has been adopted by the researcher due to the benefits it carries. As stated by Gustafsson (2017), a single case study has the advantage of being less expensive and time-demanding than several case studies. Thus, a drama classroom has been selected in UiTM for this single case study in which students are divided into four groups to participate in the proposed interactive online activities.

3.2 Sample and Sampling Techniques
In qualitative research, the concept of purposeful sampling enables the researcher to select individuals who can contribute to an understanding of the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2014). Sampling for qualitative research focuses on selecting information-rich cases to supply a complete and sophisticated view of a phenomenon from various angles (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2007). The number of respondents required is very much dependent on the purpose of the study (Kvale, 2009). For this study, 20 participants were chosen based on the scope of research and ease of access to the location where the researcher is based.

3.3 Data Collection
The primary method for data collection was focus group discussions (FGDs). The procedures were as follows:

3.3.1 Stage 1: Interactive Group Activities
Students were involved in interactive group activities carried out within six weeks of the academic semester in August-September 2022. The students in the classroom were divided into four groups, each working on the adaptation of one movie/drama, following the four stages of Drama Exploration (DE) activities proposed in the course syllabus. Each group consisted of five students. Students were then instructed to apply the two VT thinking routines (i.e., "Think, Pair, Share', and "Ladder of Feedback") in their group activities. They were briefed on the steps of each routine and given the freedom to apply any of them in any part of the DE stages, two of which would be

directly participated by the researcher. The researcher, acting as the participant-observer, was to play the role of prompting, scaffolding, and giving instructions and feedback accordingly in the sessions that she was involved in. All these sessions were conducted virtually via either Google Meet or Zoom and recorded for replay during the post-FGDs.

3.3.2 Stage 2: Focus Group Discussions (FDGs)

A focus group is "a group comprising individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic" (Anderson, 2002). The FGDs were conducted twice, i.e., before and after completing the group interactive activities. It was important for this to be done twice so that insights into how the application of the thinking routines affects the students could be gauged upon completion. The researcher was directly involved in the discussion within which a list of open-ended questions was addressed:

Questions for Pre-Discussion:
Derived from the Social Constructivist approach that emphasises the interactive roles of the main players of education, i.e., the students and the educators, the questions asked in the first FGD (before the DE stages) were to discover the students' expectation/anticipation/hope, in terms of:

1) Interaction with peers (What is this important for? What impact has online interaction given to you?)
2) Interaction with the lecturer (Which platforms do you prefer? Do you like one-way or two-way communication?)
3) Role of the lecturer (Facilitator? Teacher? Motivator? Instructor? Do you prefer the lecturer to be directly involved?)
4) Group work/discussion (What roles should each of you play?)
5) Communication (Verbal/Non-verbal interaction skills: how important are they?)
6) Confidence (Can this be developed in the ODL drama classroom?)
7) Thinking Skills (Do you expect this course to develop your thinking skills/ ability to think critically? In what way?
8) Language improvements (which areas/skills (Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking) do you expect to improve on from this course?

Questions for Post-Discussion:
Questions constructed for the second FGD (after the completion of the DE) were further developed to discover the extent to which their expectation/anticipation/hope expressed at the beginning of the course has been realised. Referring closely to the notions of social constructivist and VT approaches that promote interaction, the questions addressed are represented in Figure 1:

The Notions	Principles	Interview Questions for Students
Constructivist Approach	The five basic principles of the constructivist theory state that: ● learning is an active process of "meaning-making gained from experiences and interactions" (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017, p. 25), ● learning occurs when students are involved in "cognitive conflict through planned problem-solving" (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017, p. 26), ● learning is social and collaborative, ● learning has an embedded assessment and reflection aspect, and lastly, ● learners take responsibility for their learning (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017).	● Did you find the activities meaningful to you? In what way? ● Did you get to share your experience in completing the tasks? ● Which activities required you to solve problems? ● Did you collaborate well with your group members? ● Were you assessed and given feedback well? ● How committed were you in contributing to and completing the tasks?
Visible Thinking (the "Thinking Routines" applied practice in the classroom)	• Foster deep learning • Cultivate engaged students • Change the role of students and teachers • Enhance our formative assessment practice • Improve learning (even when measured by standardised tests) • Develop thinking dispositions	● How much knowledge and skills have you gained? ● Did you feel engaged in the interactive activities? ● What role do you think should be played by students and lecturers in the 4-stage of Drama Exploration? ● Did you feel the interactive activities improve your learning, even before getting the performance results? ● Were you aware of the thinking process involved? How was thinking developed, visualised and documented?

Figure 1: Questions addressed in the Focus Group Discussions

3.4 Data Analysis

Video recordings of the FGDs were transcribed verbatim and then described using thematic analysis with the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1. Familiarise with the dataset (note initial comments and ideas), 2. Generate initial codes (systematically code the whole data set), 3. Search for themes (collate similar codes into potential themes), 4. Review themes (check if themes work in relation to the data set, check for examples that do not fit, and generate a thematic map/diagram), and 5. Refine themes (refine specifics of each

theme and linkages between them). Nvivo 12 was used to assist in the coding and thematic analysis of the data. Figure 2 summarises the methodological steps in completing the study.
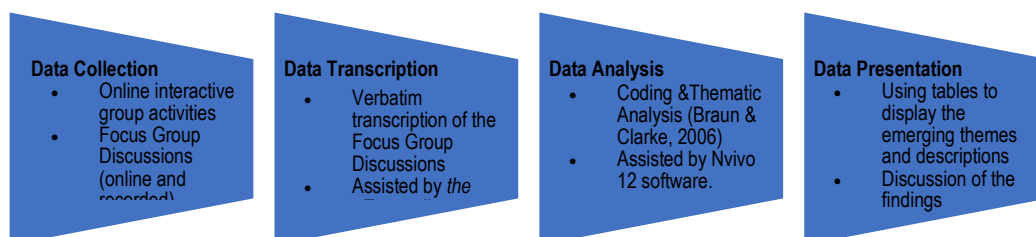
Data Collection
- Online interactive group activities
- Focus Group Discussions (online and recorded)

Data Transcription
- Verbatim transcription of the Focus Group Discussions
- Assisted by *the*

Data Analysis
- Coding &Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Assisted by Nvivo 12 software.

Data Presentation
- Using tables to display the emerging themes and descriptions
- Discussion of the findings

Figure 2: Summary of Methodology

4.0 Findings

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis. These categorisations were derived by specifically addressing the RQs in coding the FGD responses. Table 1 shows each theme with its description, the number of files (4 to represent the 4 FDGs), and the number of references (to show the frequency of mentions in the FGDs).

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of the Transcribed Data

No.	Thematic Descriptions	Files	References
Theme 1	**Interactive Roles of Students**	**4**	**14**
1.1	The need to turn on the cameras to ease verbal and non-verbal communications	2	3
1.2	Brainstorming and direct interactions	2	2
1.3	Everyone has to know their part and be mentally strong to contribute	2	3
1.4	Consistent thinking throughout all stages of the Drama Exploration	1	2
1.5	The need to have a unified agreement and conclusion on how to do things together	1	2
1.6	Visually documenting the results of thinking in the form of a storyboard	1	2
Theme 2	**Interactive Roles of Lecturer**	**4**	**14**
2.1	Attentive and helpful, flexibility and balance in giving feedback	1	3
2.2	Instructor: giving clear information and instructions on assessments	1	3
2.3	Facilitator and Motivator	2	3
2.4	Scaffolding to build new knowledge upon learners' existing ideas, allowing students to create and improve	2	3
2.5	Giving constructive comments for improvements	2	2
Theme 3	**Positive impact on doing online drama activities**	**4**	**34**
3.1	Improving coherent and cohesive communication	2	3
3.2	Time flexibility	1	1
3.3	Drama is a means to distress	1	2
3.4	Developing critical thinking and social skills	4	9
3.5	Improving language skills, especially speaking and writing (the script)	2	3
3.6	Enhancing collaboration	2	8
3.7	Developing problem-solving skills	2	8
Theme 4	**Challenges faced during ODL drama classrooms**	**2**	**5**
4.1	Difficulty in synchronising with non-verbal communication	2	2
4.2	Internet connection problem	1	1
4.3	Working as a group instead of an individual	1	1
4.4	Problem with device	1	1

5.0 Discussion

Addressing RQ1 and RQ2, some specific interactive roles highlighted in the focus group discussions were categorised into four emerging themes, as listed in Table 1. Interactive roles played by both students and the lecturer were seen as equally important, as indicated in the same number of references, i.e., 14. Turning on the camera for ease of verbal and non-verbal communication was given the utmost

importance besides being mentally strong to contribute and consistently thinking throughout the process, and visually documenting the results of thinking.

Student A: "I think in terms of interaction, it is easier to interact by having the cameras on because usually, it is difficult to interact and discuss the script and the adaptation without seeing each other's faces. It is important that we see how we react to the script, and while practising it, we can definitely see each other's faces. When it comes to drama adaptation, I think it is very important for us to show our faces, compared to other assessments, like only written assessments."

For the lecturer, the role as the instructor, facilitator, and motivator, scaffolding to build new knowledge upon learners' existing ideas, and flexibility and balance in giving constructive comments were seen as most prominent among others. This goes on par with one core construct of Vygotsky's social constructivism, i.e. the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that emphasises the role of the instructor in learning. ZPD suggests that, with the help of an instructor, students can understand and master knowledge and skills that they would not be able to on their own (Schreiber & Valle, 2013):

Student B: "I think there should be a nice balance of having a lecturer who can deliver information, instruct and facilitate us in the process and still having flexibility. Because when we give ideas, maybe the lecturer can open our eyes and mind more to what could be improved. Like I said, it's a nice balance because once we already know the feedback from the lecturer, we will have the flexibility to create and improve the process as we go."

From the findings, it can be gathered that students perceived interactive roles in the ODL drama classrooms as very significant, parallel with the social constructivist approach to education. As described by Akpan et al. (2020), social constructivism is a learning paradigm that views learning as a social process in which students collaborate to learn meaningfully through group activities. Social constructivism shifts the responsibility of knowledge acquisition from the teacher to the student. Also, it transforms the student from a passive listener to an active participant and a co-constructor of knowledge among co-learners. The VT routines applied in the four stages of DE have allowed this active participation of students without disregarding the lecturer's interactive roles in instructing, guiding, facilitating, and giving feedback.

As for RQ3, in terms of the impact of ODL drama classrooms, 34 references were recorded for positive feedback compared to only five for challenges. Developing critical thinking skills and social skills, problem-solving skills, and enhancing communication topped the chart for positive impact, whilst the biggest challenge stated was the difficulty of synchronising with non-verbal communication having to do drama activities online:

Student C: "I think we did a lot of thinking throughout all the stages. Applying the Think-Pair-Share technique was also helpful. In each stage, we did a lot of thinking, and the input and output that we gained throughout all the respective stages were really useful, and I would say we had really fruitful discussions during the stages. So, the thinking went really well. I would say we were thinking vigorously; we were able to think for ideas on the spot."

Student D: "I think the most needed thinking process was developed, especially on the storyboard. That's where we saw a lot of visions and how exactly the thoughts were developed, and I would say how we see the scenes would be recorded. We used The Ladder of Feedback technique to communicate, and it was helpful."

From the above responses, it is clear that students recognised the positive impact of the interactive activities during the DE stages. In constructing and presenting the storyboard, for example, students were not only developing their thinking skills but were also consciously and visually "documenting" the results of their thinking. As asserted by PZ Cultural of Thinking (CoT), the only way we can get to know what our students are learning and how they learn is by making thinking visible. Using structures, routine, inquiry, and documentation can improve the visibility of students' ideas to encourage an increased level of understanding and learning (Cultures of Thinking, Project Zero, n.d.). Internet connectivity and device problems were only mentioned twice in the FGDs, indicating that these were not the main problems faced by most students. Despite these few drawbacks, the many advantages have obviously subdued them. As recommended by the respondents, 50-50 execution of online and face-to-face learning should be the way forward for drama classrooms, besides continuously giving helpful feedback, giving the marks of ongoing assessments on time, and sustaining good communication and time management. Again, critical and smart thinking was mentioned as a crucial element.

6.0 Conclusion

From the addressed and discussed RQs, it can be concluded that the interactive activities and environment developed in the ODL drama classroom fit well with the proponents of social constructivism and VT approaches, having positive impacts on students' learning experiences, such as improving students' collaboration, communicative and critical thinking skills. However, the study is not without limitations. The research's findings might not be broadly applicable due to the study's focused and in-depth exploration of a single case. To address this limited generalisability, the study embraces the concept of extrapolation, suggesting that while findings are specific, they can inform practice in similar DiE contexts with caution and consideration for differences in conditions. For future research, a larger sample of students from other tertiary language classrooms which apply drama techniques may be involved. The method of classroom observation may also be employed to look closely and comprehensively into the actual practice of the VT routines. Besides focusing on students, samples may be broadened to involve lecturers to gauge their insights as well. In short, the benefits of using drama in the

pedagogy of online language classrooms are hardly contested, the success of which depends highly on its implementation of activities that promote thinking and interactive roles played by the main players.

Acknowledgements

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Based on its scope and objectives, this study has explicitly looked into students' experiences of one tertiary drama classroom divided into smaller groups. Nonetheless, the themes that emerged from this study may be utilised as variables for widening and filling the research gaps in the field of DiE, social constructivism and VT involving other educational samples and settings.

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