

INTEGRATING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND VISIBLE THINKING IN VIRTUAL DRAMA CLASSROOM: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

NOR, Z. M.¹ – DASS, L. C.^{1*} – SELVARANI, J.¹

¹ *Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: laura404[at]uitm.edu.my*

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Abstract. The expansion of digital learning in the post-pandemic era has created new opportunities for innovative pedagogical approaches in higher education. However, maintaining student interaction and engagement in the virtual language learning environment remains a concern, particularly in drama education, where collaborative and experiential practices are crucial. This conceptual paper aims the complex challenges inherent in virtual drama classrooms by proposing and describing a conceptual framework. The framework combines Social Constructivist Theory (SCT), founded by Vygotsky in 1962, and Project Zero (PZ)'s Visible Thinking (VT) principles developed by Ritchhart that happen in 2006. Grounded in the works of Lev Vygotsky, a renowned socio-constructivist theorist, the proposed framework underpins the significant role of social interaction in the construction of knowledge through dialogue, collaboration and mediation. Aligning with SCT's approach to learning, PZ's VT routines, such as Think–Pair–Share and the Ladder of Feedback, are intended to help learners be conscious of their thought processes and, as such, facilitate structured language for discussions, scaffold peer-to-peer communication, and encourage students to think reflectively during drama-based tasks. The proposed framework demonstrates how drama pedagogy, integrated with the underlying social constructivist principles and VT routines, can stimulate collaboration, creative and reflective thinking and thus engagement amongst learners. It therefore seeks to contribute to the scholarly literature on drama education, interactive language learning and social constructivist teaching approaches, providing practitioners with new ways of understanding and designing more engaging drama-based learning activities in virtual contexts.

Keywords: *Social Constructivist Theory (SCT), Visible Thinking (VT) routines, virtual drama classrooms, conceptual framework, interactive language learning*

Introduction

In recent years, digital technology has been changing educational practices around the world. The adoption of online learning environments in higher education institutions has been increasing (Crompton, 2013). The online learning that took place in haste during the COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated the use of virtual platforms for teaching and learning, communication, and collaboration (Dhawan, 2020; Chung et al., 2020). Online learning not only offers flexibility and convenience but also poses several challenges, such as maintaining academic interaction between learners and teachers (Martin and Bolliger, 2018). When discussing the importance of interaction in language learning, communication and cooperation are always channels for learners to use the language they have learnt, to negotiate meaning, and to get feedback (Long and Porter, 1985; Swain, 2000). To maintain interaction in online classrooms, teachers need to use appropriate strategies to elicit conversations and interaction (Ong and Quek, 2023). This paper is driven by pedagogical challenges that arise when drama teaching is implemented in virtual environments, specifically in the context of an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Current drama teaching practices draw heavily on

principles and techniques grounded in sociocultural perspectives of language and learning and are built upon foundations of improvisation, role-play and learner exploration (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). When teaching drama in the virtual environment, there is a perceived and proven loss of connection with learners, a decrease in participation, and fewer opportunities for learners to interact with one another.

According to a recent study, drama education pedagogies can aid learners in developing their communication skills, creativity and critical thinking (Hu and Shu 2025). Other researchers have looked into other methods and approaches for structuring students' thinking to facilitate and enhance reflective dialogue in classroom discourse. Visible Thinking is an approach to thinking skills developed by Project Zero, which involved the creation of various thinking rituals to make students' thinking visible through routines such as Think–Pair–Share and Claim–Support–Question (Ritchhart et al., 2011; Ritchhart and Church, 2020). Despite the recent surge in research on drama pedagogy and Visible Thinking routines, few studies have explored the integration of drama pedagogy with the thinking strategies underlying communication and interaction in virtual drama classrooms. This conceptual paper reviews the relevant literature and proposes an integrated framework by employing Social Constructivist Theory and Visible Thinking routines to stimulate interactive learning processes in online drama classrooms.

Review of relevant literature

Language learning and interaction

Interaction in language learning has been a prominent focus in language acquisition studies since the inception of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Learning a language, from this viewpoint, is a process that enables learners to interact communicatively with each other and with instructors, negotiating meaning, and receiving immediate feedback that enables them to construct language knowledge and use. Swain (2000) asserted that learners can most productively utilise language during collaborative problem-solving when they are engaged in joint productive engagements. This collaborative dialogue allows learners to reflect on language use and develop linguistic competence through social interactions. This paper outlines a pedagogical approach for promoting collaborative dialogue and related outcomes. Research into classroom discourse has shown that dialogue is a significant feature of learning environments. In particular, Mercer (2000) has argued that exploratory talk can facilitate learning and enable learners to construct shared understanding through discussion of ideas and reasoned argument. Students in collaborative learning situations, therefore, process information more deeply and jointly construct knowledge through dialogue. Interaction in online learning environments is an important factor for engaging students in online learning (Martin and Bolliger, 2018). Interactive online teaching approaches (e.g., live lectures, interactive discussion forums) can enhance engagement in online learning. Empirical evidence also suggests that collaborative learning approaches could improve students' learning performance in virtual learning environments (Ng et al., 2022). Most recent studies found that structured interaction and collaborative conversation are crucial to sustain engagement and language development in digital learning contexts (Ong and Quek, 2023; Lei and Jeyaraj, 2023).

Social constructivist theory

The Social Constructivist Theory (SCT) is a theoretical approach to investigating the role of interaction in teaching and learning. The theory is underpinned by the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who posited that learning takes place through social interaction and through the cultural intermediation of knowledge, beliefs, values and practices (Vygotsky, 1962). In social constructivism, one significant concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), focusing on the difference between what a learner can do on his or her own and what a learner can do with the help of more experienced peers or the teacher. In order to facilitate learning, learners engage in collaborative learning with scaffolding in order to reach a higher state of achievement. Scaffolding in education is not limited to the traditional forms such as questioning, modelling, feedback and task design for learning activities. Scaffolding can also be achieved through putting students into groups where students learn with each other's support and guidance. Thus, the social constructivist approach through scaffolding is relevant to current educational practices that are digitally enabled and highly collaborative. Recent research further suggests that teacher scaffolding plays an important role in supporting equitable collaborative knowledge construction in digitally mediated learning contexts (Kraatz et al., 2023). Research into language learning has increasingly shown that interaction plays an important role in learners' cognitive development. Learners need to collaboratively negotiate form and meaning within spoken language in order to jointly construct and learn language, while also individually negotiating form and content (Swain, 2000). These principles align closely with drama pedagogy, which encourages collaborative exploration and shared meaning-making among learners. Such ideas remain highly relevant in contemporary language pedagogy, where constructivist approaches emphasise learner participation, interaction, and meaning-making (Aljohani, 2017).

Drama pedagogy in language learning

Drama pedagogy has long been recognised as an effective way of teaching communication skills and promoting students' participation in the language learning classroom (Boudreault, 2010). Drama education is used here to refer to any pedagogy that utilises drama techniques to engage students in learning. Once learners engage in drama activities such as role-playing, improvisation, and storytelling, they are able to effectively practise and improve their communication skills. Process drama is learned through embodied enactment of scenarios, collaborative planning, sharing of personal experiences and stories, and reflection. Process drama is commonly used in educational settings to foster collaborative learning, and students develop broader vocabulary and critical thinking through participation in these performances (Kao and O'Neill, 1998). Recent studies continue to investigate how drama can be used in language teaching and learning. Given that drama pedagogy can nurture creative learning in the contemporary world, this paper argues that it can further enhance English-speaking skills and instil learner confidence, particularly among university students. Hu and Shu (2025) found that drama education enhances learners' creativity, communication skills, and collaborative thinking, all of which are essential competencies for twenty-first-century learning. Similarly, demonstrate that drama-based instruction significantly improves speaking proficiency and learner confidence among university students studying English as a foreign language. In addition, systematic reviews of drama pedagogy indicate that drama activities encourage reflective learning and active participation in language classrooms (Luo et.al 2024). The case studies of collaborative storytelling and

improvisation offer teachable alternatives that can be combined with a variety of other pedagogies in language classrooms and presented in brief or extended lessons. Through collaborative storytelling and improvisation, students engage in shared meaning-making processes that align closely with constructivist principles of learning.

Visible thinking and thinking routines

Visible Thinking (VT) is a pedagogical approach developed by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to promote deeper learning through reflective thinking processes (Ritchhart et al., 2011). The approach emphasises creating classroom cultures where learners actively reflect on their reasoning and engage in collaborative inquiry. Central to this approach are thinking routines, which consist of structured sequences of questions designed to scaffold students' thinking and encourage them to articulate ideas, examine evidence, and explore multiple perspectives (Ritchhart & Church, 2020). Recent research has further highlighted the effectiveness of Visible Thinking routines in promoting meaningful learning. Thinking routines can enhance students' ability to organise ideas, engage in reflective dialogue, and participate actively in collaborative learning activities (Lei and Jeyaraj, 2023). Similarly, reports that Visible Thinking routines improve learners' ability to express reasoning and participate actively in English language discussions. Additionally, thinking routines support metacognitive awareness and deeper conceptual understanding among students (Main, 2025). By making learners' thinking visible, these routines enable students to evaluate their reasoning and build upon the ideas of others.

Interaction in virtual learning environments

Virtual learning environments necessitate the development of new approaches to pedagogy in order to encourage meaningful interaction amongst students. In the absence of face-to-face dialogic conversation and collaborative engagement, online learners often remain passive consumers of content in cyberspaces, staring at the screen and merely absorbing large amounts of data (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020). Interactive learning activities are increasingly adopted in online courses to keep students engaged in learning. Martin and Bolliger (2018) highlight the importance of instructor-student, student-student, and student-content interaction in online learning environments. In addition to enabling asynchronous delivery of instruction, collaborative digital tools can also promote learning interaction in virtual classrooms (Ng et al., 2022). For example, in online courses, activities like group discussion, collaborative projects, and peer feedback can encourage students to engage actively in learning. For drama education, such interactive features must be retained within online environments, since drama activities need to include not only conversation, but also planned collaboration and discussion within small groups of users. Virtual drama activities require structured dialogue and collaboration to maintain the creative and interactive nature of drama learning (Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy, 2020).

Conceptual framework for virtual drama classrooms

Based on the need for an integration of drama pedagogy with the thinking strategies underlying communication and interaction in virtual drama classrooms, and supported by the reviewed literature, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that describes interaction in virtual drama environments. The framework is underpinned by the Social

Constructivist Theory, drawing on the Visible Thinking approach and drama pedagogy. Drama activities within the framework promote collaborative learning and engagement by providing an experiential context for learning and teaching. Students engage in role-play and improvisation, perform stories and texts, while exploring methods of communication and creative expression. The Visible Thinking routines are used as “mediational tools” that frame or structure classroom discussions and ideas, guiding students and teachers through questions about data or situations, and promoting learning. These routines proposed by Project Zero, such as the Ladder of Feedback and Think-Pair-Share, provide opportunities for students to make their ideas or thinking visible, interact with others and reflect on learning, by utilising structured language forms and functions. Through consistent participation in these routines in the drama classroom, interaction becomes a central mechanism for knowledge construction. Students collaboratively explore dramatic scenarios, analyse characters and situations, and build shared understanding through dialogues. *Figure 1* illustrates how drama education is underpinned by social constructivist principles and integrated with drama pedagogy and Visible Thinking to structure social interactions and dialogue in drama classrooms, within virtual collaborative contexts. A drama pedagogy and performance setting offers the perfect environment for this kind of learning.

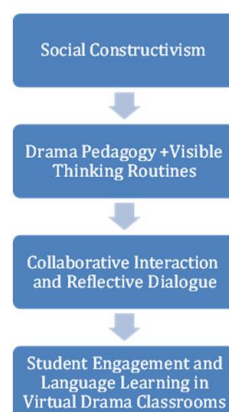


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for interaction in virtual drama classrooms.

Within the conceptual framework, social constructivism provides the theoretical foundation by emphasising the role of dialogue and collaboration in knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). Drama pedagogy provides the experiential learning context in which students engage in role-play and collaborative storytelling. Visible Thinking routines function as pedagogical tools that guide learners’ thinking and structure reflective dialogue during drama activities (Ritchhart et al., 2011; Ritchhart and Church, 2020). The framework also reflects contemporary evidence on scaffolding and constructivist language pedagogy in digitally mediated environments (Aljohani, 2017; Kraatz et al., 2023). Taking part in these processes can encourage learners to talk and debate about issues, make judgements and decisions and become more aware of their own thinking and language use, during interactive activities such as constructing the storyboard and later writing the script. These processes can help to engage students and enable meaningful language use in virtual drama classrooms.

Implications for teaching and research

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper has significant implications for students, educators and researchers. First, it highlights the importance of structured interactions in virtual learning environments. Teachers and students are challenged to do more than simply present information. To reap maximum benefit from using technology to deliver drama education, educators should design drama activities that encourage dialogue and collaborative reasoning. Through incorporating live interactive dialogue and collaborative reasoning into virtual delivery, as proposed by the Visible Thinking routines, drama teachers can utilise the routines to establish conducive online learning environments. Second, incorporating Visible Thinking routines into drama education could help students deepen their reflective thinking and enable them to verbalise what they have explored and learned during the dramatic process. Students are encouraged to reflect upon their written drama scripts while collaboratively utilising technology to practise, rehearse and improvise their dramatisation. Third, integrating the Visible Thinking routines into drama practices would make the structured language practice a part of the dramatic process. In this way, drama activities are no longer seen as merely product-driven, but also process-driven. Last but not least, the study highlights the need to build on these findings in future research by exploring how these routines impact interaction and engagement within virtual drama classrooms in both lower and higher education contexts.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has proposed a framework that integrates Social Constructivist Theory and Visible Thinking routines to foster interactions in virtual drama classrooms. By functioning as mediational tools that scaffold collaborative dialogue and reflective thinking, the thinking routines can support meaningful interaction among learners in online environments. The framework contributes to the theoretical understanding of drama-based learning in virtual contexts and provides a foundation for future empirical research examining interactive roles in drama classrooms.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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