

MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS ON ATTENDING DRAMA CLASS AND PERFORMING DRAMA USING ONLINE PLATFORM

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Abstract

Due to the pandemic outbreak, educational institutions had no choice but to implement online teaching and learning. The challenges were countless for students and lecturers in adapting to the new teaching and learning techniques and methods. Such challenges were more pertinent in courses such as theatre or drama. Before the pandemic, the teaching and learning of drama classes had always been conducted face-to-face, and students were expected to stage drama performances physically. Whether it is a minimal or an elaborate stage setting and acting practice, students usually have to spend much time preparing for the performance day. However, the Covid-19 pandemic completely changed the landscape of drama classes, and they were forced to be done virtually. Hence, this study investigates the students' perceptions of attending online drama classes at a Malaysian state university. 60 TESL undergraduates participated in this study. A mixed-methods research approach was employed to gather the data for this study, including a close-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The survey and interview findings showed that the students faced various challenges concerning live experience, teacher-student and peer interactions, accessibility, and accomplishments.

Keywords: online drama class, online drama performance, challenges, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the teaching and learning process was affected globally. An immediate measure and action were needed to ensure the teaching and learning process continued as usual. The education field had to shift from traditional in-person teaching to virtual classrooms. Aristovnik et al. (2020) claimed that “the pandemic has had a significant influence on the academic work and life practices of higher education students”. Educational institutions had no choice but to implement remote learning using online platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom and Microsoft Team. With some challenges and difficulties, everyone slowly eased into the teaching and learning process remotely.

During the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia, the education system in Malaysia, too, went through a significant shift. Schools and higher learning institutions adopted virtual learning as the new norm. All classes were conducted using various online learning platforms. This shift resulted in many challenges, such as WIFI connectivity issues, students not having laptops or computers, faulty speakers, cameras and microphones, students playing truant in class, refusing to turn on the camera during class, and not participating in classroom activities. Also, there were more considerable challenges with teaching certain subjects virtually. Not all subjects are suitable to be taught virtually. For instance, drama or theatre was one subject that was challenging to be taught and conducted virtually as it involves practical and hands-on learning and preparation. Furthermore, drama lessons need interaction between teachers, students, and the audience. As asserted by Muhammad Azri (2021), “the nature of theatre cannot be learned entirely through theories and concepts”.

Drama should be acted physically (Shakfa, 2012). Hence conducting drama classes virtually will undoubtedly be challenging for both students and instructors as they require both physical and practical involvement and engagement. Particularly for this subject, learners would recognise the importance of communication and concentration because drama could only be done with a meaningful interactional context (Bsharat, 2021). For lecturers, shifting from physical drama lessons to online drama lessons can be difficult as they must find different methods to deliver their lessons effectively. To reiterate, drama learning is commonly conducted with total physical interaction. Therefore, learning it online will become a major barrier for many students. In line with this, it is deemed important to find out students’ perceptions towards learning drama online, which could shed some light on the potential of conducting virtual drama lessons in the future.

The cultural and social context heavily influences teaching and learning drama in a learning environment. This can be justified from the perspective of social constructivism, which views learning as part of cognitive development stemming from social interaction and guided learning. (Mbat, 2012). Vygotsky, the proponent of social constructivism, views learning as a lifelong process dependent on social interaction and social learning. This theory provides opportunities for students to collaborate with teachers and peers in constructing knowledge and understanding (Kapur, 2018). This is particularly relevant to drama education because learning in drama is ‘based in process’ (Wright, 2017). When drama classes are conducted virtually, social interaction is also expected to occur through asynchronous and synchronous collaboration. As social constructivism is also a form of collaborative learning, the application of this teaching strategy in online teaching and learning allows for virtual groupings and interactions, which could subsequently enhance students’ life experiences. This research aims to answer the following question:

1. What are the TESL undergraduates' perceptions of attending online drama classes and performing drama using online platforms?

METHODOLOGY & METHODS

This study employed a mixed methods research design. According to Creswell (2003), mixed methods research is a research methodology that entails collecting, analysing, and integrating quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or a longitudinal programme of inquiry. Also, combining two methods may be superior to using only one method because it is more likely to provide rich insights into research phenomena that cannot be fully understood using only qualitative or quantitative methods (Dawadi et al., 2021).

Sixty third-year undergraduates from a state university in Malaysia who majored in TESL (Teaching English as Second Language) education participated as respondents in this study. These respondents, who were in an intact class, were selected using a purposive sampling technique in which they had the experience of attending online drama classes for 14 weeks and presenting their drama performance on an online platform. This was the only online drama class offered during this university's 2020/2021 academic session.

For the quantitative data, a survey was administered to gauge how the students perceived the challenges they faced by them while attending drama classes and performing drama using an online platform. The questionnaire adapted from Ali (2021) consists of 25 items constructed using a five-point Likert scale. The items are grouped into four aspects: live experience of learning drama (9 items), teacher-student interaction and peer interaction (5 items), accessibility (5 items), and accomplishment (6 items). The data collected from the survey were tabulated into percentages and frequency for descriptive analysis.

Additionally, six students participated in a semi-structured interview. For this, eight interview questions were constructed following the three components of the questionnaire. The responses from the interview were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

TESL Undergraduates' perceptions towards performing drama online

The students' perceptions of performing drama using online platforms were explored in four aspects: live experience of learning drama, teacher and student interaction and peer interaction, accessibility, and accomplishment.

1. Students' live experience of learning drama online

Table 1: Live Experience of Learning Drama (n=60)

Items	Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Learning drama through an online platform works very well for me.	7 (11.7%)	17 (28.3%)	21 (35%)	13 (21.7%)	2 (3.3%)
2. I find it unnatural to attend drama classes via an online platform.	3 (5%)	2 (3.3%)	6 (10%)	21 (35%)	28 (46.7%)
3. It was enjoyable to learn drama via an online platform.	9 (15%)	12 (20%)	22 (36.7%)	12 (25%)	2 (3.3%)
4. I was focused entirely throughout the drama class via an online platform.	13 (21.7%)	9 (15%)	28 (46.7%)	9 (15%)	1 (1.7%)
5. I could express myself in drama class well via online classes.	7 (11.7%)	3 (5%)	3 (5%)	18 (30%)	29 (48.3%)
6. There is no difference in learning drama between face-to-face and online methods.	40 (66.7%)	12 (20%)	6 (10%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)
7. I wished that I had attended the drama class face-to-face.	-	-	3 (5%)	7 (11.7%)	50 (83.3%)
8. I learned a lot about drama techniques via online classes.	4 (6.7%)	7 (11.7%)	26 (43.3%)	20 (33.3%)	3 (5%)
9. I wished I had performed the play on a real physical stage.	-	2 (3.3%)	2 (3.3%)	7 (11.7%)	49 (81.7%)

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the respondents preferred to have live experience when it comes to learning drama. Most students (83.3%) strongly agreed that they preferred attending face-to-face drama classes and wished they had performed the play on a real physical stage (81.7%). More than half of the respondents (81.7%) felt it was unnatural to attend drama classes via online platforms. Despite the Covid situation, most respondents still felt attending drama classes via online platforms was unnatural. Besides that, most respondents (66.7%) felt a great difference in learning drama face-to-face compared to online. Additionally, only 16.7% of the respondents agreed they were completely focused throughout the online drama class. Another 22% disagreed that they were completely focused throughout the lesson, and the majority (46.7%) remained neutral. Only 14 respondents enjoyed learning online drama classes; interestingly, a majority (36.7%) remained neutral. Only 23% of the respondents learned much about drama techniques via online classes, and the majority (43.3%) remained neutral. Even though the respondents were apprehensive about attending the drama class on

an online platform, 47 students still agreed that they could express themselves during classes, and only ten disagreed that they could express themselves during classes. The respondents understood that classes could not be conducted face-to-face due to the pandemic and lockdown. However, most were still determining if they enjoyed attending online drama classes.

The respondents' perceptions regarding the live experience of learning drama were also reflected in their interviews. Their responses were revealed through two themes: not enriching (theme 1) and lack of learning (theme 2).

Table 2: Live Experience Learning Drama (Aspect 1)

Themes	Interview Responses
1. Not Enriching	<p data-bbox="528 678 1433 824"><i>“As I said it earlier, I wish it was physical so that we all learn better and have more fun experience in learning theatre via physical bcs thru online platform, i think it is not as much as we can learn physical.”</i> (Respondent 1)</p> <p data-bbox="528 864 1433 965"><i>“To be honest, no, because theatre should be done physically and not online...I can learn valuable knowledge in physical class”</i> (Respondent 2)</p> <p data-bbox="528 1010 1433 1115"><i>“To be honest, no. Because it was supposed to be physical, and I believe that learning drama physically would become better than learning it online.”</i> (Respondent 4)</p>
2 Lack of learning	<p data-bbox="528 1149 1433 1256"><i>“Actually, no, I didn't. I guess because we didn't have much experience handling theatre class online and it's very hard for us as well.”</i> (Respondent 3)</p> <p data-bbox="528 1296 1433 1402"><i>“For me, I think both physical and online drama class could give me a really good result, but I would prefer to have it physical since we have a lot to learn such as body gestures.”</i> (Respondent 5)</p> <p data-bbox="528 1442 1433 1585"><i>“I was not very confident at that time because I think I could've done better in learning drama if it was a physical class and there are a lot of challenges that I faced during an online learning for drama.”</i> (Respondent 6)</p>

A total of six respondents participated in the interview. During the interview, the respondents shared their experience learning drama online. From the interview session, it can be concluded that all six respondents preferred to learn drama face-to-face rather than online. Respondents 1, 2, and 4 felt that learning through face-to-face classes would be more enriching. On the other hand, respondent 3 expressed that she did not gain much experience handling drama via an online platform. Lastly, Respondent 6 did not feel confident attending and performing drama via an online platform.

2. Students' perceived impact of learning drama online on teacher-student interaction and peer interaction

Table 3: Teacher-Student Interaction and Peer Interaction (n=60)

Items	Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I am comfortable communicating electronically with my classmates during drama class.	8 (13.3%)	6 (10%)	10 (16.7%)	31 (51.7%)	5 (8.3%)
2. I am comfortable communicating electronically with my lecturer during drama class.	11 (18.3%)	13 (21.7%)	24 (40%)	10 (16.7%)	2 (3.3%)
3. All team members cooperated in planning and staging the play via an online platform.	9 (15%)	6 (10%)	10 (16.7%)	28 (46.7%)	7 (11.7%)
4. I can reach out to my lecturer to seek advice for the preparation of staging of the drama performance.	2 (3.3%)	4 (6.7%)	16 (26.7%)	19 (31.7%)	19 (31.7%)
5. The teaching techniques used by my lecturer allowed us to engage with him/her easily.	2 (3.3%)	4 (6.7%)	15 (25%)	21 (35%)	18 (30%)

Table 3 shows the respondents' perceptions towards the impact of online drama classes on teacher-student and peer interaction. A majority of 38 respondents (63.4%) agreed that the lecturer was available to assist and guide them throughout the staging of the drama preparation. Only 3.3% felt their lecturer could not assist them much. Besides that, 39 respondents agreed that the teaching techniques used by the lecturer allowed them to engage with her easily, and only six disagreed. Another 24 respondents disagreed that interacting with the lecturers during online classes was easier, and another 24 remained neutral about this. Besides that, 58.7% of the respondents could cooperate with their peers in planning and staging the play via an online platform. Only 15% of the respondents strongly disagreed that they could collaborate with their peers in planning and staging via an online platform. Despite the challenges, 60% of the respondents were comfortable communicating via the online platform, and 13.3% were uncomfortable communicating via the online platform.

The respondents' perceptions of teacher-student and peer interaction were gathered during the interview. Three themes were derived from their responses: difficulty in interacting with classmates (theme 1), continuous peer engagement (theme 2) and availability of a lecturer for advising (theme 3).

Table 4: Teacher-Student Interaction and Peer Interaction (Aspect 2)

Themes	Interview Responses
Difficult to interact with classmates	<i>“One of the challenges of learning theatre online is that it was hard to interact with my groupmates.”</i> (Respondent 1)
Continuous peer engagement	<i>“I interact with my friends through google meet and whatsapp where in that platform we always discuss on the drama assignments given by our lecturer.”</i> (Respondent 4)
Availability of lecturer for advising	<p><i>“She would ask for our progress and from that we interact with her through class. We use whatsapp to ask her simple questions but for progress we asked her in class.”</i> (Respondent 2)</p> <p><i>“All of the students used Microsoft Teams in our class and then if we have like any questions regarding the class, we can ask the lecturer by the end of the class.”</i> (Respondent 4)</p> <p><i>“Usually at the end of the lesson, the lecturer will ask if we understand the lesson or if we have any questions, that’s when the students can ask the lecturer on anything about the assignments or about the task. That are some of the times that students can actually interact with our lecturer.”</i> (Respondent 6)</p>

During the interview session, Respondent 1 shared that she faced challenges communicating with her peers. However, Respondent 4 could interact with her friends via Google Meet and WhatsApp. Hence, over 14 weeks, the students faced ups and downs in communicating with their peers. Next, most respondents shared that the lecturer addressed any enquiries or doubts about the class through WhatsApp or online platforms during or after the classes. She used all means of communication in guiding and answering the queries and problems faced by the students. She interacted with the students via WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams and allocated time after the class to answer questions.

3. Technical challenges in attending online drama classes

Table 5: Technical challenges encountered by students (n=60)

No	Items	Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	I faced connectivity issues in attending my drama class.	7 (11.7%)	3 (5%)	3 (5%)	18 (30%)	29 (48.3%)
2.	I could not participate in live online discussions due to a faulty microphone.	9 (15%)	14 (23.3%)	32 (53.3%)	4 (6.7%)	1 (1.7%)

3.	I did not face any technical challenges when staging the play online.	15 (25%)	17 (28.3%)	22 (36.7%)	5 (8.3%)	1 (1.7%)
4.	I cannot turn on my camera during online classes.	17 (28.3%)	16 (26.7%)	21 (35%)	5 (8.3%)	1 (1.7%)
5.	I could hear my lecturer and classmates' voices clearly.	13 (21.7%)	13 (21.7%)	27 (45%)	6 (10%)	1 (1.7%)

Table 5 shows the technical challenges faced by the respondents during their 14-week drama class. Most of the respondents (47%) faced connectivity issues when attending online drama classes, and only ten respondents did not face connectivity issues. In addition, only five respondents agreed that they could not participate in class discussions due to faulty microphones and 23 respondents disagreed with this, and another 32 stayed neutral. This could only mean that students choose not to respond more than faulty microphone issues. Only a fraction of the respondents (10%) agreed they did not face any technical difficulties when staging the drama online. However, more than half of the respondents (53.3%) disagreed that they did not face any technical difficulties when staging their online drama performances. Besides that, only six respondents agreed that they always kept their cameras turned on during online classes, and 33 disagreed as they kept their cameras turned off during the classes. Lastly, seven respondents agreed that they could hear their lecturer and classmates' voices clearly, and 26 disagreed that they could hear their lecturer's and classmates' voices. This issue could have been a major obstacle for the respondents to concentrate on their lessons and participate in discussions.

The respondents' responses regarding accessibility were recorded during the interview. Only one theme was captured based on their responses - 'connectivity issue'.

Table 6: Accessibility (Aspect 3)

Theme	Interview Responses
<i>Connectivity issue</i>	<p><i>“One of the challenges of learning theatre online is that it was hard to join with my friends to discuss things because of my lousy internet at home..you know right my house is in the kampung (village).” (Respondent 1)</i></p> <p><i>“The challenges that students often faced when learning theatre online was the poor internet connection, even in normal classes we still are having these problems most of the time. So yes, internet connection plays a big role when learning online.” (Respondent 2)</i></p> <p><i>“The challenges that I faced was we didn't have no knowledge on theatre and maybe internet problems and connections and comprehension between teacher and</i></p>

	<p><i>students.” (Respondent 3)</i></p> <p><i>“To me the challenges that I faced during learning online was the internet connection that makes it hard for me to understand what the lecturer is teaching.”</i> (Respondent 4)</p> <p><i>“Internet connection is also an issue because when the internet connection is lagging for the students or for the lecturer, we are not able to understand the lecture very well. Sometimes we get kicked out and disconnected from the class.” (Respondent 6)</i></p> <p><i>“I also have problems with internet connections and the WIFI here is not very stable. Also, I have problems with group discussions because the free time of each person is different. So, it’s hard for us to communicate at the same time.” (Respondent 5)</i></p>
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During the interview, all six respondents unanimously agreed that internet connectivity significantly hindered attending online drama classes. They had issues attending online classes and interacting with their peers. Furthermore, due to connectivity issues, the respondents faced challenges in comprehending the lectures. They could neither hear the lecturer nor understand the lecture conducted. Lastly, the internet connectivity issues also hampered the group discussion between peers. Since the respondents were meeting on the virtual platform, further discussion or communication became limited.

4. Student's sense of accomplishment in attending online classes and staging online drama

Table 7: Perceived Sense of Accomplishment (n=60)

No	Items	Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	I was able to complete and submit assignments given successfully via an online platform.	0	3 (5%)	9 (15%)	25 (41.7%)	23 (38.3%)
2.	Performing drama online was more satisfying than performing on a real stage.	19 (31.7%)	9 (15%)	21 (35%)	11 (18.3%)	-
3.	I was satisfied with my achievement in staging online drama.	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	7 (11.7%)	21 (35%)	30 (50%)

4.	Many people attended our online drama performance.	2 (3.3%)	1 (1.7%)	6 (10%)	22 (36.7%)	29 (48.3%)
5.	My team received positive remarks about our performance via live chat.	-	-	8 (13.3%)	19 (31.7%)	33 (55%)
6.	I felt proud to be able to stage a play via an online platform.	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	11 (18.3%)	21 (35%)	26 (43.3%)

The aspect of accomplishment is discussed in Table 7 to find out the respondents' level of achievement when attending the classes, completing the assignments as well as staging the drama in online platform successfully. Most respondents (80%) agreed that they had finished and submitted the assignments via online platforms, and only 5% disagreed that they could complete the tasks successfully. However, only 11 respondents agreed that performing online drama was satisfying compared to performing on a real stage. Another 28 respondents strongly felt that performing on a real stage would have been more satisfying than on an online platform, and another 21 remained neutral about it. Besides that, a sense of accomplishment was felt by 51 respondents when many people attended their play when it was live-streamed on Facebook. Only three respondents felt not many attended their play. Furthermore, a significant number of respondents (86.7%) agreed that their team received positive remarks about their performance via the live chat during the Facebook live stream, and 13.3% remained neutral about this. Lastly, 78.3% of the respondents felt proud for being able to stage an online play successfully, and only 3.4% felt otherwise.

The respondents' responses regarding accomplishments were recorded during the interview. Their responses were discussed based on two themes: academic performance (theme 1) and satisfaction (theme 2).

Table 8: Accomplishment (Aspect 4)

Themes	Interview Responses
<i>Academic performance</i>	<i>"I got what I deserved. because I got a B, so I think that's good enough for online platform."</i> (Respondent 1)
	<i>"Surprisingly, yes. I thought I was not going to ace it, but I think me, and my group did pretty good in this course."</i> (Respondent 4)
	<i>"I think all of us did very well and we aced that subject."</i> (Respondent 5)
	<i>"We got good grades because our teammates were very helpful, and the lecturer was very supportive."</i> (Respondent 6)

Satisfaction

“Although we could not do it on a real stage...I still feel proud of myself...but if there another chance, want to perform on a real stage (Respondent 2)

“I love the feedback received in the live chat...many praised my group performance” (Respondent 3)

In addition, during the interview, the respondents shared their feelings about completing their assignments and staging an online drama performance. All the respondents were satisfied with the grades received. Respondent 4 never thought she would do well in this course. Also, Respondent 6 felt that she received good grades due to helpful teammates and a supportive lecturer. Even though Respondent 1 received a ‘B’ grade for this course, she was satisfied and felt it was good enough for an online class. Besides that, Respondent 2 affirmed that she was proud to stage the play online successfully. However, she still wished to perform on a real stage if given a chance. Lastly, Respondent 3 loved the feedback received in the live chat while streaming their drama performance on Facebook live. She recalled that her group especially received many praises.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the respondents’ views, attending online drama classes were challenging and gave them a negative learning experience. The abrupt shift from face-to-face to online classes resulted in respondents' lack of preparation in adjusting themselves to attending online classes. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the respondents in four aspects: live experience, teacher-student and peer-peer interaction, accessibility, and accomplishment.

Firstly, the respondents unanimously felt that attending drama classes face-to-face was the most effective way of learning drama. For them, the face-to-face class would have included real-life experience and fun learning. Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, the respondents had to experience drama learning and acting remotely from home. Secondly, the lecturer-student and peer-peer interactions were successful to some extent in which the lecturer and the respondents connected via Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and WhatsApp platforms. The lecturer stayed connected with the students on the online platforms during and after class. The students, too, managed to interact with their peers for discussions. However, the connectivity issues (aspect 3) somewhat affected the learning and interaction between the lecturer and students and among students. Students will eventually lose interest in participating in online classes due to technical issues such as internet connectivity (Tukan, 2021). On the other hand, the final aspect, ‘accomplishment,’ garnered positive responses from the respondents. Even though their drama performances were presented online, the respondents felt proud of themselves. The drama production made them proud as they worked remotely to stage their drama. This experience was a great learning curve and intervention in staging online drama performances.

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented changes impacting teaching and learning. Due to that, there is also a shift in the teaching and learning methodology. Teachers needed to move from traditional classroom teaching to digitalised teaching platforms. Drama is also one of the subjects that need face-to-face human interaction and engagement. However, the lockdown period pushed the lecturer and the students to explore virtual platforms for teaching and learning drama. Drama teachers began to think more deeply about how digital media could make the drama more educative besides learning to use digital pedagogy

effectively (Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2022). As revealed in this study, the lecturer and students successfully used the online platform to teach and learn and stage their drama performances. Even though it was challenging, the lecturer and the respondents somewhat managed to overcome these obstacles.

Generally, the respondents' perceptions revealed that it is feasible to conduct drama classes online. However, a hybrid mode is highly recommended as most students still prefer a live experience of performing drama. Additionally, this study had several limitations. Since the data for this study was collected during the lockdown period, the researchers had difficulty contacting the respondents for more information. Next, this study only focused on one group of students from a university. Hence the findings cannot be generalised for a larger population. Future studies should also be conducted to investigate lecturers' perceptions and readiness to teach drama using an online mode. Another area of study that is worth considering is the challenges of technical aspects, such as creating and editing an online drama.

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