

# **The Efficacy of Role-Play in the Development of Productive Knowledge of Lexis in TESOL: A Study Based on a University in Sri Lanka**

**Mediyawe Piyarathana<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

This study examines how role-play can help university students in Sri Lanka improve their knowledge of vocabulary. Students often struggle with communication skills and vocabulary despite studying English for many years. This study investigates the impact of engaging in role-play on the development of accurate pronunciation of lexis. It examines whether pronunciation difficulties contribute to communication issues during role-play and explores strategies for addressing these pronunciation issues. Additionally, it explores how participants in role-play resolve misunderstandings in communication. The data were gathered through a purposive sampling method from a group of eight undergraduate students who enrolled in the selected university and chose English as their degree subject during their first year of study. The participants were instructed to participate in a role-play, which was recorded both before and after receiving

feedback, along with the semi-structured interviews. The role-play recordings were rated by two academics who are native speakers, and the information was supported by the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. Based on the role-play data rating, it was determined that all participants originally fell into the intermediate and limited groups. The participants faced difficulties in pronunciation related to suprasegmental features, affecting their speech clarity. Despite improvement, some issues persisted. Given the participants' shown growth and favourable outcomes in the role-play, as well as their positive interview feedback, it may be concluded that teachers should allocate more time to teaching word stress and proper pronunciation. The results indicate that role-play may be used to enhance the productive features of vocabulary as a successful method of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to assist English learners.

**Keywords:** Efficacy, Lexis, Productive Knowledge, Role-play, TESOL

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1. Senior Lecturer Department of Languages, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka.

E-mail: revpiyarathana@busl.ac.lk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3629-574X>



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## **Introduction**

The ability to communicate intelligibly is speech fluency. English fluency is necessary for the students in the university system in Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka was a British colony, the status of English changed after independence. There was a significant impact on English after the National Language Policy was introduced (Sri Lankan constitution, 1978, chapter IV, Article 19) by designating Sinhalese and Tamil as the national languages of Sri Lanka while English remained a link language both locally and internationally. At present, English is taught to the student monks of the selected university as a subject and compulsory English course using several teaching methods, as the university monks need to attain speech fluency in English for the propagation of Buddhism overseas, fulfilling the objectives of the University Act (Sri Lankan Parliament Act No. 26 of 1996). Therefore, improving the communicative fluency of the university student monks will be especially useful. It is observable through the process of evaluation of speaking ability in oral tests that the communicative abilities of the student monks are not sufficient to meet their needs. It is a timely venture to engage in research by applying the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to improve the communicative ability of the student monks with the development of lexis. There are various methods and techniques for developing speaking fluency such as listening, asking open-ended questions, role-playing and so on. Role-playing can be considered an

effective method for developing the communicative fluency of students since communication is an essential part of role-play.

There is a lack of communicative fluency in English and knowledge of lexis among the student monks even after an extended period of learning English. Although student monks learned English in primary and secondary education, their inability to communicate in English fluently affects higher studies immensely as the priority is given to oriental subjects like Pāli and Sanskrit considering the necessity of monks in the Sri Lankan context. To address the existing challenges, the efficacy of role-play in the development of productive knowledge of lexis will be explored through the research with a study based on the selected university to improve the speaking fluency of student monks, to use the appropriate form, meaning and use of lexis as well as to engage in the propagation of Buddhism nationally and internationally in English.

## **Research Problem**

The demand for the propagation of Buddhism in English in the world is increasing day by day, as a result, university student monks are expected to have the capability to communicate in English spontaneously with the appropriate use of form, meaning and vocabulary to fulfil this requirement. Out of the student monks, around one hundred and fifty, enrolled to the selected university each year only five to ten student monks are qualified to

learn English as a Subject or in English medium for their degree because of the insufficiency of the English knowledge. Given the necessity of communicative fluency in English among student monks of the selected university, this research will be incredibly significant in finding solutions to the problem. Similarly, the research will pave the way for exploring the possibility of developing productive knowledge of lexis through role-play while proposing suitable actions for improving the productive knowledge of lexis and students' efficacy in communication to address the prevailing problem. According to the topic of the research, the following research questions are to be addressed in this research.

**RQ1:** How does participation in role-play develop the pronunciation of lexis?

**RQ2A:** Does pronunciation contribute to communication issues during role-play?

**RQ2B:** How can these pronunciation issues be dealt with?

**RQ3:** How do participants in role-play resolve issues related to misunderstandings in communication?

### **Aim of the Research**

This research aims to explore the efficacy of role-play in the development of the productive knowledge of lexis in TESOL through a study based on a university in Sri Lanka. For this purpose, it is expected to investigate how participation in role-play develops appropriate pronunciation of lexis,

whether pronunciation contributes to communication issues during role-play, how to address these pronunciation issues and how the participants in role-play resolve the issues related to misunderstandings in communication.

### **Importance of the Research**

This research makes a beneficial contribution to the field, as there is limited research done on role-play in the Sri Lankan context, particularly with undergraduate monks. This research will also be significant for those who enter Sri Lankan universities as undergraduates in improving their communicative fluency in English since this research aimed at exploring the efficacy of role-play for the development of productive lexis based on a university in Sri Lanka. This study will arouse a new interest not only among university undergraduates but also university lecturers, curriculum designers and even the recent graduates who plan to pursue careers in teaching English. The study provides insights into the efficacy of role-play in the development of productive knowledge of lexis in language classrooms. Therefore, it will encourage syllabus designers in Sri Lanka and elsewhere to design English syllabi, including role-play, an instructional technique. Textbook writers will equally benefit from preparing activities with role-play to enhance communicative fluency in English. Additionally, this study will be helpful to the researchers engaging in research related to language activities in TESOL.

## Literature Review

When engaging in the research on the efficacy of role-play in the development of productive knowledge of lexis in TESOL, the aspects of literature such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), language learning activities, lexis, and pronunciation need to be reviewed, paying attention to the research questions. In the teaching and learning process, many activities can be used to develop communicative fluency in English. Several studies have been done on role-playing, but they do not focus attention on the development of lexis. So, for the present research, relevant literature will be reviewed in this section.

### Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become an effective approach to teaching languages. From the inception of CLT in the 1970s (Richards, 2008), it has evolved in several phases. Richards (2008:6) points out the three phases of its development as "traditional approaches (up to the late 1960s), classic communicative language teaching (1970s to 1990s) and current communicative language teaching (late 1990s to the present)". The main concern of language teaching in traditional approaches has been given to the competence of grammar as the foundation of language proficiency. The second phase was the development of the communicative aspect with the composition of linguistics. The third stage of CLT is with the principles

to be applied in different ways, for example, teaching context, nature of the learner, their aims etc. Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that group and pair activities, as well as language games, and role-plays, can be provided to the learners for learning a language with CLT.

In Sri Lanka, English Language Teaching (ELT) has not been in a satisfactory state as it has failed to achieve the required improvement in communication competence (Dhanapala, 2013). The emphasis of the Presidential Task Force, which was formed to examine and reform education policies, was that many students were not in a position to use English to an acceptable degree even though they had learned ESL for nearly ten years (National Education Commission, 1997). Wijesinghe (2004) said that the quality of English teaching in mainstream education had become extremely low. De Mel (2020) agrees and quotes the GCE (O/L) English language pass rate as 62.36 in 2019 (<https://www.doenets.lk>) that most of the students who passed the exam did not have the necessary skills to communicate in English to qualify for the job market.

In Sri Lanka, the CLT approach was implemented by the Sri Lankan Government to teach English in the government school system (National Institute of Education, 2001). Even after adopting the CLT approach and publishing textbooks targeting communication, Rathnasena et al. (2013) explained that testing was done only with reading and writing

skills in the English language exams set by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka. Neglecting listening and speaking abilities in the Sri Lankan exams has also contributed to the lack of communicative abilities in English. Another reason for the weakness of oral ability of Sri Lankan English learners, as Karunaratne (2009) says, is the lack of English proficiency of English teachers to conduct CLT and their dependency on using their mother tongue for teaching in the classroom, which impairs the communication of the target language. According to Karunaratne (2009), Perera (2001) and Wickrema and Colenso (2003), the main reason for the failure of CLT in Sri Lanka is that teachers are not given sufficient training with the CLT approach or the lack of pedagogical knowledge. The study by Suntharesan (2012) shows that the context of CLT in Sri Lanka not only clashes with the native aspect of culture with teacher-dominant classrooms but also other factors of demotivation like students' limited vocabulary, listening difficulties because of classroom environments with noise and using technology infrequently in the classroom. The present research attempts to investigate the communicative aspect of language by implementing role-play for the productive development of lexis with special attention to pronunciation.

Many activities help learners to improve speaking fluency. Historically in language teaching, Ellis (2002) and Harmer (2002) have presented the eight types of communicative activities such as picture games, guessing games,

mimes, sound games, debates, fact-finding games, role-plays, and jigsaw games and some of them serve as language games.

### **Role-Play in Language Teaching**

Role-play activities provide an opportunity for students to improve communication in various social contexts and different roles in society. Samaranyake (2012), through research with Thailand university students, found out that authentic materials and role-plays are very effective in enhancing the oral proficiency of students. Crookall and Oxford (1990) and Littlewood (1992) emphasized that role-play helps learners improve oral proficiency as well as provides the opportunity for students to improve linguistic behaviour. "The term, 'role-playing' has been presumably coined by a Viennese psychiatrist Jacob L. Moreno, in the 1920s." (Arjoranta, 2009:3). "Role-playing is an immersion to an outside consciousness ("a character") and interacting with its surroundings" (Pohjola, 2003:84). "Role-playing is immediate character immersion" (Pohjola, 2003:89). "Role-playing is defined as any act in which an imaginary reality is concurrently created, added to and observed" (Makela, et al., 2005:207). In the Sri Lankan context, role-play has been included in the Sri Lankan school curriculum by the National Institute of Education since 2001 to improve the communicative skills of learners (English Unit, NIE 2001). Role-play is used in this research to investigate the productive knowledge of lexis by focusing on pronunciation.

## **Productive Knowledge of Lexis**

In this research, the ability to develop a productive knowledge of lexis will be examined using role-play. According to Harmer (1991), knowing vocabulary means gaining knowledge of word meaning, use, formation, and grammar. Accordingly, the meaning of words with their context and sense relations should be known while usage is to know its metaphor and meaning, collocation, style, and register. Word formation should be known about parts of speech, prefixes, and suffixes as well as spelling and pronunciation. Word grammar should be known with the type of nouns (countable uncountable etc.) verb complementation, phrasal verbs etc. adjectives and verbs etc.

Concerning the productive and receptive skills, Nation (1990) analyses that form, meaning and use should be learned to know vocabulary. To measure the productive knowledge of lexis, role-playing will be utilized in this research. When the components of vocabulary knowledge presented by Nation (2001) are concerned, the productive aspect of vocabulary knowledge, especially speaking, will be examined in the present research. Accordingly, the knowledge of word pronunciation becomes the first to examine for knowing vocabulary properly. Secondly, the written and spelt forms of words must be known for the development of vocabulary. Thirdly, parts of words should be known for expressing meaning. Next, the use of correct word form will help to express meaning properly. Concepts of words will result in producing

various functions about association and grammar with necessary limitations in usage. The productive aspects of vocabulary knowledge will be examined in this research with special reference to role-play and pronunciation.

## **Pronunciation of Lexis**

Lexis and pronunciation become the key bases of communication processes of any nature. At the university level, Bondaruk (2019) confirms the importance of teaching pronunciation and lexis by analysing teaching manuals used at Uman State Pedagogical University for teaching English pronunciation and lexis in higher education settings. Yoshida (2016) states that communication becomes difficult to comprehend when students are unable to use proper lexis appropriately in their speech. It is possible to state that teaching pronunciation and lexis is necessary for expressing ideas with good pronunciation even in the university setting. Celce-Murcia, et al. (2010) and Yoshida (2016) say that teaching intelligible pronunciation as well as communication is a necessity since speaking should be in a suitable way that listeners should be able to comprehend without much effort. Speaking fluency is the delivery of speech naturally, smoothly, and effortlessly. Similarly, Pronunciation is the production of speech sounds in a way that is easily understandable to most regular speakers of the language. Regional or national varieties of English pronunciation are considered correct to the degree that they are easily understandable to most regular speakers of the language.

In the Sri Lankan setting, there has been some research regarding pronunciation. Shackle (1987) presents common phonological matters related to South Asian languages in Learner English (in Swan and Smith, 2nd ed. 2001). Widyalkara (2014) reveals that there has been negligence in the ESL classrooms in Sri Lanka. He proves that pronunciation teaching has been done contingently at schools in Sri Lanka during the last decade which has resulted in many undergraduates finding loud reading difficult or problematic even after learning English at schools for thirteen years. After a thorough analysis of Sri Lankan School English textbooks from grade one to eleven, Premarathne and Gamage (2011) reveal that the awareness of phonetics was introduced in grade nine when students were fourteen years of age, giving a secondary place for teaching pronunciation. Wijetunga (2008) points out that a reason for understanding pronunciation to be challenging in the Sri Lankan context is the insufficiency of prominence regarding pronunciation instruction.

### **Research Methodology**

This section gives information about the research methodology which provides the research context, sampling, research design, data collection procedure and the approach to analysis.

### **Research Context and Participants**

The research was conducted based on one of the universities in Sri Lanka which is governed by the Ministry of Higher Education and all the circulars

issued by the University Grants Commission affect the academic and administrative work of the university. The official language of Sri Lanka is Sinhalese or Sinhala, and English is taught as a degree subject and compulsory subject to all the students of the selected university.

The participants of this study consisted of ten student monks who follow English as a Degree Subject in the first year at the selected university. All participants are Sri Lankans except for one student, who is from Bangladesh and became a monk in Sri Lanka in 2006. He has studied in the education system of Sri Lanka for monks known as Pirivena. He has done his primary education in the native language of Sri Lanka. Six participants of the study are at the age of twenty-three while four students are at the age of twenty-two. They have the same level of English. In the Pirivena system, great emphasis is paid to the oriental languages Sinhala, Pāli and Sanskrit. English is taught to all the students in the primary education of Sri Lanka. So, the participants can learn English as a subject for five years in the Pirivena system in their primary education. Due to the pandemic, data collection from participants was done online. The permission from the Head of the Department of Languages of the relevant University was obtained via an email to get the relevant number of participants. Accordingly, the details of the participants were sent by a Senior Instructor in English at the relevant University to facilitate the research. The approved written consent form was sent to each participant and a Zoom meeting

was held to explain the consent form, research, its aim, procedure and all the necessary details before participants made their decision to participate in the research.

## **Research Design**

The objective of this study is to explore the efficacy of role-play to develop the productive knowledge of lexis with special attention to pronunciation. The correct pronunciation of lexis, the issues about pronunciation, ways of solving those issues and the effect of role-play participation are examined in this research.

The methodological approach adopted in this research is the Mixed Method. When the objective of the study is considered, the Mixed Research Method is suitable as the research involves the practical interest (Cohen, et al., 2018) and it attempts to understand, clarify and interpret speaking in a role play (Habermas, 1974). The qualitative research method applied is via the analysis of the interviews, extracts of which will be used to support data from the questionnaire and issues emerging from the analysis of recordings. Two native speakers of English will rate the pronunciation within the role-play.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

### **Role-Play**

Role-play was used to investigate the productive aspect of language use, especially speaking. Initially, a sample role-play, which was done with the participation of five pairs of students,

was recorded to investigate issues with a specific focus on pronunciation issues with role-play participants. The participants were recorded as they engaged in the role-play. The role-play recording was done without any input from the researcher in the form of a pre-test. The students engaged in the role-play in pairs, and they were recorded through Zoom according to the convenience of the participants. The recordings were then reviewed to identify key pronunciation issues, particularly those affecting intelligibility. Two native speakers listened to the recordings and evaluated them with a criterion provided to them. The six criteria were designed to measure the productive aspects of language, especially speaking with a focus on segmental and suprasegmental features.

Next, the participants were provided with the necessary explanations to educate them on pronunciation issues and the areas in which they needed improvement. Using the evaluation and rating of the first recording, input was provided to the participants. The input focussed on the identified pronunciation issues concerning segmental and suprasegmental features. Then, the participants were given a real-life scenario as a role-play where they used the input, they received to demonstrate their ability to advise with the appropriate usage of lexis and its pronunciation. At this stage, the participants acted independently. When presented with a situation in the role-play, they provided advice using the input they received.

Finally, the role-play scenarios were recorded, rated, and transcribed. In this process, role-play was used to identify the pronunciation issues and the necessary input on the identified pronunciation issues of lexis was provided to improve the overall intelligibility and reduce the breakdown of communication between interlocutors.

### **Semi-structured Interview**

Qualitative data regarding the role-play participation experiences, English learning and educational backgrounds were collected through a semi-structured interview. An interview provides the opportunity for interviewers and interviewees to negotiate their ideas about the world as well as to convey their views about specific situations. "An interview is a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, seen, spoken, heard, and indeed with online interviews, written." (Cohen et al., 2018:506) One of the qualitative data collection strategies is the semi-structured interview, which involves predetermined but open-ended questions, allowing in-depth discussions. In this search, the researcher chose a semi-structured interview since the open-ended nature of questions provides the opportunity for the interviewer and interviewee to discuss the topic with more details to uncover the necessary facts. Another reason for adopting a semi-structured interview is if there is difficulty for the interviewee to answer a question, the interviewer can provide cues to persuade the interviewee to contemplate

the question further. The researcher did not select structured questions as they would not have more control over the topic of the interview. The interview questions of the present research were designed to obtain details about the participants' educational backgrounds, English learning experiences, and role-play activities. Therefore, the interview of the present research aimed to investigate the contributing factors to the pronunciation of lexis and participation in role-play as the interview was conducted after the pre-test. It was also to understand the issues the participants experienced when engaging in role-play and to find out if they received pronunciation input when they were learning lexis through role-play.

### **Data Analysis**

Role-play recording at the start and after the teaching as well as semi-structured interview data provide a considerable amount of data, and the procedure of data analysis will be explained in the following section.

### **Role-play Recording Data**

To analyse the role-play scenarios, the recordings were to be analysed to compare the identified pronunciation issues in the pre-input recordings with those identified in the post-input recordings. Certain criteria were used to evaluate speaking efficacy and pronunciation, and the pronunciation was rated by two native speakers of English. In this research, two English Native speakers recorded the role-play to facilitate the participants and rating

the performance of lexis about pronunciation and speaking skills. Five recordings of the participants in pairs were to be rated according to the criteria given below.

Criteria for Rating the Role-play Recording	
Native-like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All vowels and consonants are produced in a manner that is easily understood by regular speakers of the language</li> <li>• The speaker uses assimilation and deletions appropriate to continuous speech.</li> <li>• Stress is placed correctly in all words and sentence-level stress is fully appropriate.</li> </ul>
Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vowels and consonants are pronounced clearly and unambiguously.</li> <li>• A few minor consonant, vowel or stress distortions do not affect intelligibility.</li> <li>• All words are easily understandable.</li> <li>• A few consonants or consonant sequences may be distorted.</li> <li>• Stress is placed correctly on all common words, and sentence-level stress is reasonable.</li> </ul>
Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most vowels and consonants are pronounced correctly.</li> <li>• Some consistent errors might make a few words unclear.</li> <li>• A few consonants in certain contexts may be regularly distorted, omitted or mispronounced.</li> <li>• Stress-dependent vowel reduction may occur in a few words.</li> </ul>
Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some consonants and vowels are consistently mispronounced in a non-native-like manner.</li> <li>• At least 2/3 of speech is intelligible, but listeners might need to adjust to the accent.</li> <li>• Some consonants are regularly omitted, and consonant sequences may be simplified.</li> <li>• Stress may be placed incorrectly on some words or be unclear.</li> </ul>

Limited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many consonants and vowels are mispronounced, resulting in a strong intrusive foreign accent.</li> <li>• Listeners may have difficulty understanding about 1/3 of the words.</li> <li>• Many consonants may be distorted or omitted. Consonant sequences may be non-English.</li> <li>• Stress is placed in a non-English manner; unstressed words may be reduced or omitted, and a few syllables added or missed.</li> </ul>
Disfluent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pronunciation seems completely characteristic of another language.</li> <li>• Many consonants and vowels are mispronounced, disordered, or omitted.</li> <li>• Listeners may find more than ½ of the speech unintelligible.</li> <li>• Stressed and unstressed syllables are realized in a non-English manner.</li> <li>• Several words may have the wrong number of syllables.</li> </ul>

### **Semi-structured Interview Data**

The data from the interviews before and after the input recordings will be transcribed and analysed to discover contributing factors regarding pronunciation experienced by the participants. The interview data will also be helpful to understand how the participants felt about their performance before and after the input. The data will also enable us to find whether the input was useful or not for the participants. The interview data will facilitate the rating of their performance as well as the contributing factors of their pronunciation of lexis and their participation in role-playing language games.

### **Presentation of Data and Discussion**

This section presents the results obtained through the role-play and semi-structured interviews. Initially,

the background information of the participants will be presented and then data will be presented according to the research questions followed by discussion. Although the initial interview was done with all the participants, only four role-plays before and after the input could be obtained due to technical issues related to online connectivity and the withdrawal of a student who has changed his degree subject. Accordingly, only eight post-interview data could be obtained for the analysis and discussion. To obtain a clear structure of the presentation of data, this section deals with the findings according to the research questions followed by the supporting data in the discussion.

### **Background Details of the Participants**

The participants of the data collection consisted of ten undergraduate student

monks from a Sri Lankan university. Six of them are at the age of twenty-three and the other four are twenty-two years old. According to the data gathered, one of them is from Bangladesh and he has lived in Sri Lanka since 2006. After becoming a monk, he continued his studies in a Pirivena which is an educational institute for Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. All the other participants are Sri Lankans or Sinhalese. When the educational background of the participants is analysed, five of them

have completed their Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations and qualified for university entrance. Others have faced their Primary Pirivena Final examination and Advanced Level examination to qualify the university entrance. Those who study for the Ordinary Level examination learn English as a subject for eight years and in Pirivena only for five years. Six of the participants have followed English courses apart from the regular study.

### Details of the Participants

No.	Group	Name	Age	Nationality
1	1	Student A (SA)	22	Sri Lankan
2		Student B (SB)	22	Sri Lankan
3	2	Student C (SC)	23	Sri Lankan
4		Student D (SD)	22	Sri Lankan
5	3	Student E (SE)	23	Bangladesh
6		Student F (SF)	23	Sri Lankan
7	4	Student G (SG)	23	Sri Lankan
8		Student H (SH)	23	Sri Lankan
9	5	Student I (SI)	23	Sri Lankan
10		Student J (SJ)	22	Sri Lankan

### RQ1: How does participation in role-play develop the pronunciation of lexis?

A given role-play scenario with four pairs of groups was recorded before and after the input. The recordings were rated by two native speakers with the given criteria and the analysed data are

available for the observation. Similarly, the interview data before and after the input are also available to support the role-play data analysis for identifying the development of the pronunciation of lexis.

With the rating of the initial role-play recording, it was stated that all

the students fell into the category of intermediate and limited. Student C fell into the intermediate and good category. With the rating of the recording, the pronunciation issues were identified. All the students have the same type of pronunciation issues. It has been identified that all the participants have problems with the stress of words as well as sentences. The participants have issues with intonation as well. When they ask a question, they do not use a rising intonation. They overuse falling intonation. It creates difficulty for the other person to know whether he has finished speaking and it is the other person's opportunity to speak. The raters have identified pronunciation issues with /w/ and /v/ and between /th/ and /t/. There is also a lack of elision and assimilation during role-play. Linking of words or intrusion cannot be observed with the role-play participants in most of the instances. The overall comment of the raters was that most of the pronunciation issues of role-players were suprasegmental ones and they caused their speech to be unintelligible.

Through the rating of role-play, it is possible to find out that there are many pronunciation issues among the undergraduates selected for the research, although some of them have learned English for eight years in the school system and others five years in the Pirivena system. This demonstrates Wijesinghe's (2004) opinion that the quality of English teaching in mainstream education is low significantly. This also provides evidence for De Mel's (2020) point that those who pass GCE (O/L) do not have

the necessary skills to communicate in English.

The interview data suggests that role-play participation improves the pronunciation of lexis.

Student 'A' says that they must respond to the speaker in role-play. So, understanding the other and responding should be done appropriately. He thinks role-play is useful to improve their English as it creates the opportunity to speak.

We have to speak even at that moment to continue speech with the other. It helps us as we don't have many other opportunities to speak in English. (SA interview)

Student 'C' also confirms that they can learn suitable pronunciation through role-play with proper instruction.

When we role-play, we have to use the suitable words and the pronunciation. Otherwise, the other person cannot respond well. So, role-play helps us to improve our English. We learned various ways of advising in English through this practice. I can say that we can get the speaking practice for our conversation in a suitable way through role-play. (SC)

**RQ2A: Does pronunciation contribute to communication issues during role-play?**

Four role-play recordings provide evidence about the communication

issues that take place during role-play. Accordingly, the speaking flow breaks down due to the lack of proper intonation. It was obvious through role-play recording that they did not use the rising and falling intonation in the proper ways. This can be recognised as one of the issues when they engage in role-play. Since they do not use a rising intonation when they ask a question, the other person will find it difficult to respond at the proper time. Since the participants overuse the falling intonation, all sentences they make sound the same way and the listener cannot recognise the question and

where to respond appropriately.

Another pronunciation issue that was recognised through role-play is that there is a significant lack of linking words sometimes known as intrusion. Since the participants do not insert sounds to make it easier to change from one sound to another, it creates a communication issue. If they join words properly or pronounce sounds like /w/, /j/ and /r/ accurately, their pronunciation shows some fluency in the usage and the proper flow will be with them when they speak without hindering communication.

### **Linking Words/ Intrusions in the Role Play**

good+afternoon	for+an	for+about	half+an hour
get+a severe	painkillers+at	life+as	for+it
in+a good	frame+of	need+of	English+at
success+of+our	with+our	follow+another	one+of
get+a	alright+after	walking+on	first+aid
aware+about+it	have+a	novels+and	relevant+audio
your+English	it+is+a	good+idea	search+in
brilliant+idea	meet+again		

The lack of using contractions properly was another pronunciation matter that contributed to the pronunciation issue when the participants engaged in role-play. The participants tend to use the full form instead of contracted forms which creates communication issues as it affects the flow of speech as well as the fluency of speech is hindered. Apart from that, when it is not contracted, extra emphasis is placed on the expression.

The following contractions were noticeable with most of the participants of the role-play.

## Contractions in the Role Play

how are = how're

I have = I've

what is = what's

it is= it's

it will= it'll

that is = that's

father is= father's

it would= it'd

how is = how's

he will = he'll

what are = what're

I am = I'm

you'd better = you had better

Some of the participants found it difficult to pronounce three-syllable words like 'painkillers,' 'monotonous' and 'exercise'. Improper pronunciation of words lacking necessary stress in the proper syllable also creates communication issues during role-play.

When the communication issues that arose during role-play are concerned, most of them are suprasegmental. Lack of suprasegmental features during role-play causes their speech to be unintelligible. These pronunciation issues prove the fact raised by Widyalandara (2014) that even after learning English as a subject for thirteen years, many undergraduates face difficulties even with loud reading. He also points out that a contingent way of teaching pronunciation has been undertaken in the past decade at schools. These pronunciation issues provide evidence to the view presented by Premarathne and Gamage (2011) that teaching pronunciation has been given a secondary place in the English textbooks of Sri Lanka.

When the participants were questioned about the way they improved their English pronunciation, their responses provided some evidence that they had

not received proper guidance as well as the negligence of teaching English pronunciation. Six of the participants said that they used textbooks, mobile or computer applications to improve their pronunciation as they had not received the proper guidance to improve their pronunciation.

I learned by using text-to-speech. (SA)

I followed the pronunciation of my teachers, and read aloud on Google. (SB)

English dictionary, Google Translator. (SE)

I learned about English pronunciation only by looking at spelling. (SG)

With textbooks (SI)

I used the textbooks only. (SJ)

Four of the participants have used the guidance of teachers or electronic media to improve their pronunciation.

By speaking with teachers and students. (SC)

I improved my pronunciation through exercises with the teacher

in my class. I practised English recitation when I was practising for the English Day programme in the school. (SD)

I haven't been to classes. I have watched many movies and listened to songs. (SF)

I improved my pronunciation by watching YouTube videos etc. (SH)

From this evidence, it is possible to strengthen the point made by Wijetunge (2004) regarding the lack of prominence given to pronunciation instruction in Sri Lankan English teaching. As a result, the pronunciation of undergraduates has yet to improve to the level of intelligibility.

When the participants were questioned about their difficulties in learning English pronunciation, some of the responses provided evidence regarding their pronunciation issues. All the participants said that they have pronunciation difficulties except student F and he said that he does not have any idea about it. Since their responses provide evidence of the pronunciation issues identified during the role-play, it is possible to investigate them.

Some words are difficult to pronounce. I read two to three times to be familiar with the pronunciation. (SA)

Some words are permanently causing some trouble to pronounce properly. (SB)

There is no particular difficulty, but I find the difficulty to pronounce some longer words. (SD)

I think I should read more and improve my pronunciation. If I speak, I will be able to improve my English pronunciation and lack of vocabulary. (SG)

I cannot read properly long sentences; some words are difficult to pronounce. (SH)

It seems that they don't follow proper ways of improving their vocabulary and the lack of proper instruction regarding pronunciation is also evident as Wijetunge (2008) pointed out. Interview data provides evidence that they have difficulty pronouncing longer words or words with three syllables etc.

Some words are difficult for me to pronounce. (SE)

There are many difficult words for me to pronounce. (SC)

Problems with pronouncing words properly. (SI)

Some words are difficult to pronounce. (SJ)

It was obvious that when the participants of role-play had difficulty in pronunciation their communication became unintelligible. There was a breakdown in the communication as well as the flow of speech.

### **RQ2B: How can those pronunciation issues be dealt with?**

Regarding the pronunciation issues that were identified during the role-play, it was possible to provide input by arranging several practice sessions

with the participants although there were connectivity problems for some participants. It was possible to share the input recordings with them and manage the work. Initially, after the recording of the sample role-play, participants were provided with the recording of the role-play which was recorded with the participation of two native speakers. Then, the necessary instructions were provided to the participants regarding identified pronunciation issues during role-play together with suprasegmental features. Linking words or intrusion, assimilation, elision, intonation, syllables, word and sentence stress and so on were included in the input depending on the necessity to deal with the pronunciation issues.

Having identified the issues with the participants of the role-play, the necessary input was provided to them to improve their pronunciation. It was clear through the explanation also that participants were not aware of linking words, intonation, assimilation etc as they raised questions about them. When the recording of the input is observed it becomes clear that they constantly raised questions and made them very clear to them and understood. This also provides evidence of the lack of pronunciation instruction in Sri Lankan English language teaching raised by Wijetunge (2004).

### **RQ3: How do participants in role-play resolve any issues related to misunderstanding in communication?**

The application of role-play allowed for the identification of pronunciation

issues that led to misunderstandings in communication through the initial recording of the role-play. From the recognised pronunciation issues, word and sentence stress, intonation, linking words, contractions, syllables, elision, assimilation etc. were explained to the participants and the necessary input was provided to them. The recorded role-play by two native speakers was provided to the participants for their practice. Based on the rating of role-play and the interview data, it is possible to see how the participant in role-play resolved the issues about their communication issues.

The recordings of four role-plays before and after the input were provided to the native speakers so that they could rate the pronunciation of the role-play participants. Accordingly, with the rating of the recording, it was possible to identify that role-play participants had pronunciation issues mostly related to suprasegmental ones which led their speech to being unintelligible. Their issues regarding sentence and word stress, intonation, issues with /w/ and /v/, and between /th/ and t/, lack of elision and assimilation etc., were explained well by arranging several teaching sessions. Around half of the participants joined the teaching sessions and others could not join the session due to internet connectivity issues. They were provided with the recording of the input.

The rating provided regarding the role-play group two with students C and D was positive. With the initial recording, the rating of group two was Intermediate and limited. With the final recording,

it has reached the intermediate range showing some improvement with the role-play participants. The rating comment is provided below.

“There is an improvement in the recording of the students. Students C and D have improved and there are fewer places where their speech is unintelligible. The longer they speak, the more pronunciation mistakes creep in. There still remain issues with /w/ and /v/ and between the /e/ and /i/, word stress, and contractions. Generally, the introduction of a new sentence is clearer. I would rate them as more in the Intermediate range than spanning ranges.”

When it was questioned whether the participants had ever taken part in role-play, the response was that six out of ten had done the role-play before. Three of them have taken part in role-play in the usual classroom setting and the other three have joined role-play in their extra English classes.

Yes, at Pirivena, I took part in role-play.” (SA)

I have taken part in many role-plays in the course book 'Chat Book'. (SB)

I have participated in role-play language during my English course. (SD)

I have acted in role-play in the class and the morning assembly. (SE)

Yes, I have joined in a dialogue with the teacher and student. (SH)

Yes, in my English course. (SI)

This interview data also provides some evidence regarding the view of Rathnasena, et al. (2013) about the CLT approach and publishing textbooks targeting communication in Sri Lankan settings. It is possible to see that less attention has been given to communication in composing the English textbooks of Sri Lankan primary education.

When the participants were questioned about their experience as role-players, most of their responses were that role-play allows them to use language as they do not get opportunities to communicate in English in other situations in the Sri Lankan context.

I think we have to speak even at that moment to continue speech with the other. It helps us as we don't have many other opportunities to speak in English. (SA)

Actually, although I acted in them, I understand that there are mistakes, but role play is useful. (SB)

We get the experience of practising dialogues for day-to-day conversations. (SC)

I have to respond to the other members, and it is helpful. The naturalness of speaking develops in role play. (SD)

I think it helps us to improve our English as we have to talk about the given situation. (SH)

I think we can improve our abilities as I have to respond to the other. (SI)

These expressions of participants provide evidence to the research findings of Samaranayake (2012) that role-plays are effective in enhancing the oral proficiency of students.

All the students found role-play helpful for them to improve their English pronunciation even though they had some obstacles due to the prevailing situation of the world. Their expressions also suggest that role-play is helpful to improve speaking fluency as Samaranayake (2012 presents).

They are useful for improving our English knowledge. (SB)

I think they are definitely important for improving our knowledge and speaking. (SC)

Role-play is important and improves our pronunciation, words, and to improve speaking. (SD)

I hope we can remember them for learning English, and they help us learn words and sentence structures. (SF)

When the included language function with vocabulary through role-play was concerned, only student C was aware of advising in English. He has been using imperatives to give advice. All the participants improved the different ways of advising in English while improving their pronunciation related to suprasegmental features as depicted in the discussion.

## Conclusion

This section outlines the major findings and presents some possible pedagogical implications regarding the study of role-play for the productive knowledge of lexis in TESOL.

## Major Findings

### **RQ1: How does participation in role-play develop the pronunciation of lexis?**

One of the key findings is that role-play was efficient in developing the pronunciation of lexis, as evidenced by the improved performances of the participants. It was possible to observe this through the rating of role-play recordings by two native speakers. Accordingly, participants of role-play can improve some of their suprasegmental features through the practice of role-play. To find answers to this research question, analysed role-play recording provides evidence about their improvement. As a result of the input, they could overcome their pronunciation barriers and improve themselves showing the usefulness of role-play for their improvement. This finding approves what Wijesinghe (2004) presented about the quality of English teaching in mainstream education. This finding also accepts what De Mel (2020) revealed regarding the communication skills of Sri Lankan English learners. Even though the participants passed their exams, they did not improve their productive skills in the language including intelligible communication.

### **RQ2A: Does pronunciation contribute to communication issues during role-play?**

Another finding of this research is that pronunciation contributes to some communication issues during role-play. Participants experienced difficulties due to overuse of falling intonation, which disrupted their ability to decide when to respond, leading to a breakdown in the communication flow. It caused some breakdown of the communication flow. Another communication issue was that participants did not link words, or they did not use intrusion, assimilation etc. which facilitated the speakers to create the smooth flow of speech. Participants were not aware of using contractions in the role-play which created another issue placing unnecessary emphasis on their expressions, and the inability to pronounce longer words or three-syllable words created another issue with the role-play participants. The findings through this research question provide evidence of what Widyalkara (2014) revealed about the nature of undergraduates even though they studied English for an extended period in schools and Pirivenas. This finding also proves Premarathne's (2011) idea about the composition of English with a secondary place for teaching English pronunciation.

### **RQ2B: How can those pronunciation issues be dealt with?**

Another finding of this research through this research question was that proper instruction helps to deal with those pronunciation issues with

role-play participants. Providing the recording of role-play recorded by two native speakers and the explanations about the key suprasegmental features like intrusion, assimilation, elision, intonation, syllables, and word stress helped deal with the pronunciation issues. Through the input, many examples of contractions, and rising and falling intonations in questions and other sentences were familiarised to the participants. There are positive signs that pronunciation input when teaching lexis can improve their intelligibility when communicating as Wijetunga (2004) suggests on pronunciation instruction in Sri Lankan English language teaching.

### **RQ3: How do participants in role-play resolve any issues related to misunderstanding in communication?**

The findings of this research include the resolution of issues related to misunderstanding in communication during role-play. The participant could recognise the pronunciation issues that might arise when there is a lack of using suprasegmental features in their speech through their role-play, provided role-play recording of the two native speakers and the input. This suggests that communication should be given priority in composing textbooks in a Sri Lankan setting as Rathnasena, et al. (2013) point out. These findings support Samaranayake's (2012) finding that role-plays are effective in enhancing the oral proficiency of students.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The research on role-play for the

development of the productive knowledge of lexis has greatly contributed to the understanding of participants' pronunciation issues during role-play and how those issues can be dealt with fruitfully. Accordingly, the significant low condition of English teaching in Schools and Pirivenas in Sri Lanka should be taken into consideration and the necessary measures should be taken to uplift the situation. The prevailing situation at present in the School and Pirivena education system is demonstrated through the findings of this research. Since the improvement with the participants could be observed in this research, it implies that greater emphasis on pronunciation when teaching lexis can improve students' use of lexis. Role-play, as demonstrated in this study, can also be applied to improve the productive knowledge of lexis with learners of EFL classrooms and as a useful tool for communication. The pedagogic implementation is that teachers should be encouraged to include more time for pronunciation input.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

As the prevailing situation of the world affected carrying out large-scale research, this research was limited only to ten participants from a Sri Lankan university and even from among them, only four role-play recordings could be obtained with eight students as one pair withdrew due to a subject change of one student. Since the participation in this research was limited to the students studying English as a subject or English medium, it is not possible to generalise

the findings and limited to a Sri Lankan setting. Since the poor internet connection was experienced, there were difficulties in engaging in the research activities. However, the researcher managed to obtain role-play recordings, analyse their pronunciation, provide input, and then ask them to engage in role-play and compare the issues to find out if there was an improvement in their overall pronunciation. Even during the input, several students dropped out due to poor internet connection and the recording was provided to them. Due to this reason, the first interview was conducted as a structured interview and decided to conduct the final semi-structured interview in short to overcome the difficulties with the participants.

In conclusion, it is possible to state that the research was conducted with role-play to find their efficacy for the productive development of lexis with the data collection of the selected participants from a Sri Lankan University and the findings of the present research suggest that role-play participants face pronunciation issues related to productive aspects of lexis during role-play and they should be resolved for having an intelligible communication. There is the capability of concluding that a special focus should be given to pronunciation input for teaching lexis as it improves learners' intelligibility in communication. Through the research, it is possible to provide the pedagogical implication that when teaching lexis more focus should be given to pronunciation to improve the students' use of lexis. This research will be remarkable for those who wish

to explore the use of role-play for the development of productive knowledge of lexis.

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