

A Survey of Literature on Role-play as a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Activity in Sri Lanka

Mediyawe Piyarathana¹

Abstract

This research presents a methodical investigation of literature on the usage of roleplay as a pedagogical approach within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), with special attention to its application in the Sri Lankan English language education background. CLT, as a learner centred instructional basis, stresses authentic communication and the improvement of communicative competence. In this background, roleplay is widely viewed as a dynamic and successful communication method for improving fluency, confidence, and practical language application. Though international literature confirms the value of roleplay in language learning, its application in nonnative English-speaking backgrounds, particularly in Sri Lanka, remains an area for research and application for language teaching. This research implements a systematic literature review methodology, investigating peer reviewed journals, academic books, conference proceedings, and policy documents. The findings are characterised through

thematic analysis into three main parts: the educational benefits of roleplay, challenges to its application, and innovative practices documented in national and international backgrounds. The research reveals that although roleplay has noticeable benefits in improving communicative abilities, several factors, for example, limited teacher training, cultural struggle, large class sizes, and insufficient institutional support, obstruct its implementation in Sri Lankan classrooms. Moreover, comparative analyses from similar educational backgrounds highlight flexible strategies that may guide policy and practice. The research concludes that for roleplay to be efficiently integrated into CLT in Sri Lanka, specific interventions, for instance, teacher development programs, curriculum reforms, and culturally relevant teaching materials are crucial. This research contributes to the academic discourse on communicative instruction and offers a basis for future experiential research in South Asian language learning and teaching.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, English Language Teaching, Roleplaying, Second Language Acquisition, Sri Lankan English

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

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

Introduction

The international change from teacher centred to learner centred teaching has brought Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to the fore front of English language teaching. One of the main strategies in CLT is roleplay, a technique that inspires learners to practise the target language realistically in simulated reallife backgrounds. As an educational technique, roleplay not only improves the communicative competence of learners but also creates confidence, fluency, and cultural awareness (LarsenFreeman and Anderson, 2011). Globally, its effectiveness has been well documented across diverse educational settings, especially in countries that promote student engagement and experiential learning (Harmer, 2015).

Despite these international successes, Sri Lanka presents a unique case for analysis. English, though not a first language, holds significant social, academic, and economic value in the country. However, Sri Lankan classrooms have traditionally favoured grammar translation and rote learning methods, often neglecting oral communication skills (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022). Although the National Curriculum promotes communicative goals, classroom implementation is often limited due to factors such as large class sizes, inadequate teacher training, and limited resources (Sebarajah, 2017).

Role-play, therefore, presents a promising yet underexplored area within

Sri Lanka's English language teaching (ELT) framework. Several studies acknowledge its potential to simulate authentic communication and foster language learning in engaging ways (Padeniye, 2022). Yet, a consolidated understanding of how roleplay has been perceived, applied, and evaluated in Sri Lanka remains lacking. Earlier research often emphasises CLT but gives limited attention to role-play as a separate technique.

The research aims to address this research gap by conducting an extensive literature survey on the usage and results of role play in the ELT background of Sri Lanka. It will investigate how roleplay is combined into classrooms, evaluate the educational challenges involved, and show cultural and institutional dynamics influencing its use. Through critical engagement with both local and international studies, this research tries to find ways to position Sri Lanka's roleplay usage within wider CLT contexts, thus giving pedagogical understandings and recommendations for curriculum reform and teacher development.

Finally, this research will offer a contextualised consideration of significant role plays and their possibility as a CLT activity in Sri Lanka, contributing to the ongoing discourse on communicative language instruction in South Asia.

Research Problem

CLT stresses authentic communication and the growth of learners' communicative competence. In this context, roleplay is broadly recognised as an influential technique for encouraging active language usage in speaking backgrounds. Global literature supports its value in enhancing fluency, confidence, and learner engagement. However, despite its theoretical advantages, the actual implementation of roleplay in classroom settings, particularly in nonnative English speaking countries like Sri Lanka, remains inconsistent and underexplored. Teachers often face challenges such as inadequate training, large class sizes, rigid curricula, and cultural restraints, which hinder the effective use of roleplay. Moreover, much of the existing research addresses CLT largely, with limited focus on roleplay as a distinct instructive method. This lack of consolidated, context-specific analysis creates a research gap. Therefore, a systematic review of literature is needed to evaluate the pedagogical significance, challenges, and practical applications of role-play in CLT, especially within the Sri Lankan educational context.

Primary Research Question

How has roleplay been represented and evaluated in the literature as a strategy for CLT in English language classrooms?

Secondary Research Questions

1. What pedagogical benefits of role play are emphasised in CLT related

literature, particularly in enhancing communicative competence and learner engagement in ELT?

2. What challenges and limitations affect the implementation of roleplay in language classrooms in ELT, especially in nonnative English speaking contexts?

3. How do cultural, institutional, and resource-related factors shape the effectiveness and adaptability of roleplay as a CLT strategy in ELT?

4. What do comparative studies reveal about the use and impact of roleplay in CLT across different educational systems, and what gaps exist in the literature concerning its application in South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka, in ELT?

Objective of the Research

The main aim of this research is to rigorously analyse and consolidate the available literature about the implementation of role-play as a CLT activity in Sri Lanka. This research seeks to comprehend the integration of roleplay in English language classes and its efficacy in enhancing communicative competence among Sri Lankan learners through an examination of academic research, policy papers, and empirical data. The research aims to investigate the pedagogical benefits of roleplay, cultural, and institutional determinants affecting the implementation of role-play within Sri Lanka's educational framework. The research seeks to identify significant difficulties and possibilities related to the implementation of role-play in Sri

Lankan educational institutions. These features include teacher readiness, resource availability, class numbers, and the adjustment of roleplay to local cultural and language circumstances. This research aims to identify gaps in the present literature to create a basis for future research and practical involvement that may advance the effectiveness of role play as a CLT technique in Sri Lanka. This investigation attempts to develop the discussion on CLT by providing an understanding related to Sri Lanka, guiding policymakers, educators, and academics on the transformative possibility of role play in English language teaching within the country. Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyse literature in three dimensions: the educational benefits of role-play in ELT, challenges to its implementation in Sri Lankan classrooms, and innovative practices and adaptations that inform future policy and ELT.

Significance of the Research

This research study holds an extensive implication for the field of English language teaching, mainly within the context of CLT. Roleplay, as a communication and learner-centred technique, has established potential to improve authentic communication, advance speaking fluency, and increase learner confidence. Nevertheless, its practical usage remains unpredictable, particularly in settings like Sri Lanka, where traditional teacher-centred procedures often dominate. By surveying and producing existing literature on role-play within CLT, this study will offer

educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers a stronger consideration of its educational value and circumstantial challenges.

The findings of the study will help bridge the gap between concept and classroom practice by recognising the enablers and barriers to applying role-play efficiently. Moreover, it will provide an understanding of how cultural, institutional, and logistical factors encourage its success. The study will also contribute to the limited body of literature focusing specifically on roleplay in South Asian backgrounds. By stressing best practices and gaps in present research, this research will pave the way for future empirical inquiries and inform professional growth initiatives aimed at enhancing communicative competence through modern teaching procedures in English language education.

Research Background

In recent decades, the field of English language education has undergone a paradigm transformation from traditional grammar-translation and teacher-centred methods to more communicative and learner-centred methods. CLT has changed into an important educational model that emphasises authentic communication, fluency, and student engagement. A predominant method within the CLT model is role-play, allowing learners to simulate various genuine social scenarios and practise the target language in a meaningful and attractive atmosphere.

Internationally, several studies (Harmer, 2015; Larsen Freeman & Anderson, 2011) have emphasised the educational benefits of roleplay, together with enhanced speaking skills, improved learner motivation, increased self-confidence, and greater cultural awareness. Role-play inspires learners to emerge into various social roles, developing understanding and critical thinking while improving communicative competence. In spite of its recognised advantages, the application of role-play in various non-native English speaking backgrounds remains limited as a result of some practical and cultural restraints.

In countries like Sri Lanka, where English functions as a link language of significant academic and socioeconomic significance, CLT has been increasingly combined into the curriculum. However, classroom practices often lag behind policy due to a lack of teacher training, large class sizes, exam-oriented instruction, and insufficient resources (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022; Sebarajah, 2017). While role-play is mentioned in textbooks and training modules, its application is sporadic and under-researched.

This research seeks to engage in a comprehensive survey of the literature regarding the use of role-play as a CLT activity. By recognising prevailing tendencies, important benefits, common barriers, and contextual effects, this research aims to make valuable understandings that can direct educators, researchers, and policymakers in making informed decisions about

language teaching practices in Sri Lanka and similar educational contexts.

Research Limitations

This research is limited in several significant ways. Initially, as a literature based review, It does not include direct experimental data gathering through classroom observations or interviews, which may limit the profundity of practical understandings into current classroom performance. Secondly, the accessibility and availability of related literature, mostly from Sri Lanka and other South Asian backgrounds, may be limited, possibly directing towards an overreliance on international research that does not completely reflect local authenticities. Thirdly, as the research extends to various educational systems and cultural backgrounds, comparative analysis may create challenges in generalisation because of various curricula, teacher training standards, and student circumstances. Finally, the research emphasises the role-play within CLT, which may eliminate other useful communicative techniques used in language teaching. Despite these limitations, the research aims to provide a meaningful combination that can serve as a basis for future empirical research and pedagogical modernisations.

Review of Literature

The usage of roleplay as a strategic element of CLT has gathered extensive academic consideration for its influence on second language acquisition. Role-play provides learners with chances to simulate real-life communicative scenarios, thus encouraging the reliable

use of language in an organised yet energetic environment. It nurtures not only linguistic proficiency but also sociopragmatic competence, letting learners improve fluency, adaptability, and confidence in spoken communication (Sanako, 2023; Harmer, 2015). Larsen Freeman and Anderson (2011) say that roleplay, when efficiently implemented, bridges the gap between classroom language and real-world usage by placing learners in problem-solving backgrounds that demand meaningful language productivity.

Internationally, research supports the efficacy of role-play in developing oral communication, particularly in enhancing learners' interactive abilities and reducing anxiety in language use. For example, Savignon (2002) states that role-play reinforces both communicative competence and learner independence by encouraging turn-taking and peer collaboration. Moreover, Richards and Rodgers (2014) stress that role-play is mainly useful in helping students internalise practical language and expressions suitable for diverse social backgrounds, making it necessary in a CLT based programme.

In spite of its international application, the execution of role-play in Sri Lankan English language teaching presents important challenges. Through case study research with the participation of teachers in secondary schools in Sri Lanka, Dharmawardene et al. (2024) reveal that though educators have identified the theoretical significance of CLT, together with role-play, their practical application remained limited.

The disinclination is restricted by a deficiency of training, self-confidence, and institutional support. Teachers often resorted to traditional grammar-focused procedures, which were associated more thoroughly with exam-oriented teaching and their own educational practices.

Indrarathne and McCulloch (2022) present a comprehensive overview of English instruction in Sri Lanka, stressing a persistent separation between national educational goals and the realities of the classroom. Though policy papers encourage the improvement of communicative competence, in reality, many teachers lack the educational techniques and confidence to employ learner-centred methodologies such as roleplay. They perceive that CLT-oriented techniques are normally seen as time consuming or inappropriate for inflexible syllabi and large classes with many students.

Likewise, Sebarajah (2017) investigates the usage of CLT techniques to develop speaking skills among Sri Lankan English learners. The research indicates that roleplay activities develop student engagement and speaking competence. Nevertheless, it also recognised obstacles such as inadequate preservice and inservice training, a lack of resource materials, and confrontation from both teachers and students familiarised with passive learning surroundings. These organisational and attitudinal features hamper the sustainability and scalability of role-play based teaching in Sri Lankan institutes.

Padeniye (2022) investigates the use of dramabased teaching in ESL institutes, thus improving the local discourse. The research demonstrates that drama and roleplay exercises apparently improved the speaking fluency and competence of learners. The creative and collaborative essence of roleplay activities not only enhanced language proficiency but also encouraged interactive skills and empathy, fundamental elements of communicative competence. The findings of Padeniye (2022) authenticate the transformational capacity of performance based educational instruments, specifically when personalised to bring into line with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners.

Furthermore, Wijesekera (2016) highlights the importance of positioning teaching methods with the sociocultural background of students. She informs that failure to contextualise roleplay strategies may result in student uneasiness or disconnection, mostly in more conventional or rural educational surroundings where communicative language usage is less common. Therefore, any incorporation of roleplay must be based on local relevance, confirming that activities resonate with realworld experiences of learners and cultural customs.

These findings together specify that, even though roleplay provides an important possibility as a communication instrument in language classes, its successful implementation in the context of Sri Lanka demands the determination of structural

and educational boundaries. These features include inadequate teacher training, insufficiency of resources, minimal official support, and an inherent willingness for conventional practices. Bridging this gap demands comprehensive improvements, for example, curriculum reforms, capacity building programmes, and the expansion of culturally related teaching materials for empowering educators and encouraging active learning.

In summary, the literature discloses both the educational potential and practical challenges of utilising roleplay within CLT frameworks in Sri Lanka. There is a strong necessity for more context-specific experimental research and professional development activities to facilitate the successful implementation of role-play as a conventional instructional technique. Future research should focus on evaluating the longstanding effect of role-play on learner consequences and exploring advanced methods to incorporate it meaningfully into English language programmes across various Sri Lankan educational backgrounds.

Research Methodology

This research implements a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to investigate and create an existing study on the use of roleplay as a technique within CLT, with a particular emphasis on the Sri Lankan educational background. A systematic review allows the researcher to critically investigate a wide variety of sources in an organised, replicable, and clear manner, thus certifying the reliability and validity of

the analysis procedure (Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou, 2016).

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The literature was collected from numerous sources, together with peer reviewed journal articles, books, conference proceedings, policy documents, and academic articles related to roleplay and CLT. Electronic databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, Research Gate and Google Scholar were mainly used, together with national repositories for Sri Lankan research. Both international and Sri Lankan research were collected to facilitate comparative perceptions.

- Inclusion criteria included:

- i. Publications from the year 2000 onwards.
- ii. Studies focused on the educational application of roleplay within ELT.
- iii. Literature which addresses CLT values or communicative competence improvement.
- iv. Research associated with Sri Lankan or similar South Asian backgrounds.

- Exclusion criteria included:

- i. Research not available in English.
- ii. Articles concentrating exclusively on theoretical language acquisition without educational application.
- iii. Research which does not address roleplay or CLT clearly.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis method was employed to identify, categorise, and interpret key themes within the composed literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three main thematic groups were established based on preliminary coding:

- i. The Educational Efficacy of Roleplay

This explores how roleplay improves learners' communicative skills, confidence, and motivation across numerous educational backgrounds.

- ii. Barriers to Application

This investigates challenges such as insufficient teacher training, cultural confrontation, large classroom sizes, and a lack of established resources that hamper the application of roleplay in Sri Lanka.

- iii. Innovative Practices and Case Studies

This highlights effective models, techniques, or adaptations of roleplay that have shown potential in defeating contextual limitations.

Comparative Dimension

To contextualise the Sri Lankan findings, comparative analysis was led by means of data from countries with comparable sociolinguistic or educational circumstances (e.g., India, Bangladesh, and Southeast Asia). This comparative investigation aimed to recognise the best practices and flexible

strategies that could inform educational reforms in Sri Lanka.

Limitations of the Methodology

Though the systematic review delivers a comprehensive understanding of prevailing knowledge, it is limited by the obtainability of locally focused research and the absence of direct research. Future empirical studies could complement this study by testing the real-world consequences of roleplay interferences in Sri Lankan classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the CLT concept, which observes language as an instrument for meaningful interaction and stresses fluency, negotiation of meaning, and realistic communication over simple grammatical correctness. The fundamental principle of CLT is that learners improve communicative competence most efficiently through active involvement in context-rich, interactive activities (Hymes, 1972; Canale and Swain, 1980). Within this background, role-play is considered an essential technique that offers opportunities for learners to act out authentic communicative circumstances, practice language pragmatics, and improve social and emotional skills.

The research also draws on the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky, mostly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which proposes that learners improve most effectively when reinforced through social interaction and guided involvement (Vygotsky, 1978).

Roleplay enables such support by attracting learners in collective tasks that improve their linguistic abilities.

Moreover, constructivist learning theories enlighten this investigation by supporting the awareness that learners create knowledge actively through experience and reflection. Roleplay, as an experiential learning instrument, demonstrates the constructivist principles by consenting learners to represent roles, express viewpoints, and familiarise themselves with language from diverse backgrounds.

Upon the whole, these theories justify the educational usage of role-play in CLT and offer a background over which the literature will be reviewed, evaluated, and contextualised, mainly in relation to the Sri Lankan classroom atmosphere.

Discussion and Results

The literature reviewed discloses that roleplay is extensively recognised as an effective communicative tool within the CLT background, with significant benefits for language acquisition. Research from various backgrounds continuously highlights that roleplay enhances learners' fluency, confidence, vocabulary use, and practical competence (Larsen Freeman and Anderson, 2011; Harmer, 2015). It creates anxiety free environments where learners can experiment with language in meaningful social roles, thus developing both linguistic and sociolinguistic competence.

In nonnative English speaking surroundings, together with Sri Lanka,

several studies (e.g., Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022; Sebarajah, 2017) recognise the theoretical value of role-play but draw attention to important implementation challenges. These comprise inadequate teacher training, resistance to student-centred instructions, large class sizes, and limited resources. Many teachers still desire grammar-focused approaches due to exam pressures and a lack of institutional support for interactive procedures.

The review also discovers that cultural appropriateness plays a critical role in the acceptance of roleplay. In more traditional classrooms, activities that involve imaginative or emotionally expressive involvement may be viewed as troublesome or uncomfortable. Nevertheless, where roleplay has been contextually adapted, such as through culturally relevant situations or structured involvement, it has shown increased effectiveness (Padeniye, 2022).

Comparative studies from East Asia, Europe, and South Asia suggest that well-designed role-play, incorporating real-world language functions and formative assessment, can significantly improve communicative competence. However, the literature also discloses a research gap concerning role-play in South Asian and specifically Sri Lankan settings, with few empirical studies and little documentation of best practices or lasting impact.

So, the reviewed literature shows that role-play provides significant pedagogical benefits for communicative

competence, but its implementation in Sri Lanka is challenged by teacher preparedness, classroom conditions, and cultural expectations. Innovative practices, both locally and internationally, suggest adaptable strategies that can enhance the efficacy of roleplay in ELT in Sri Lanka. In conclusion, the findings specify that while role-play holds robust potential within CLT, its successful incorporation in Sri Lankan classrooms will involve context-sensitive adaptations, teacher development programs, and institutional support. Further empirical research is required to evaluate localised role-play models and their measurable outcomes on learner performance.

Conclusion

This study has examined existing literature to evaluate the pedagogical role of roleplay within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), with a focus on both global practices and the Sri Lankan educational context. The findings consistently affirm that roleplay is a powerful instructional tool that enhances learners' communicative competence, fluency, motivation, and confidence in using the English language. It brings into line well with learner-centred teaching ideas and supports language acquisition through active and experiential learning.

Nevertheless, the study also emphasises several insistent challenges in employing role-play efficiently, especially in nonnative English-speaking backgrounds like Sri Lanka. These comprise inadequate teacher preparation, resistance to change from

traditional methods, large classroom sizes, and a lack of socially appropriate resources. Although role-play is mentioned in curriculum documents and training modules, its practical use remains limited and under researched.

The literature further emphasises the importance of contextualising roleplay activities to suit learners' cultural and institutional realities. Adaptations that bring them into line with local norms and language needs tend to produce more effective consequences. Despite its potential, there remains a clear research gap concerning the longterm impact and classroom application of role-play in Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, role-play characterises an underutilised yet capable CLT technique. Identifying the barriers to its application and conducting more empirical studies will be crucial to revealing its full educational value in Sri Lankan English language education.

References

- Booth, A., Sutton, A. and Papaioannou, D. (2016). *Systematic Approaches to a Successful Literature Review*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), pp.77-101.
- Canale, M. and Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1 (1), pp.1-47.
- Dharmawardene, P., Ekanayake, T. and Perera, K. (2024). Attitudes and readiness of Sri Lankan teachers towards CLT practices in secondary education. *Sri Lanka Journal of English Language Teaching*, 13 (1), pp.22-38.
- Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In: J.B. Pride and J. Holmes, eds. *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp.269-293.
- Indrarathne, B. and McCulloch, S. (2022). English Language Education in Sri Lanka: Policy and Practice. *Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9 (1), pp.18-32.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. and Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Padeniye, S. (2022). Drama-Based Activities and Oral Competence in ESL Classrooms: A Study in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Language and Education Research*, 5 (2), pp.45-59.
- Richards, J.C. and Rodgers, T.S. (2014). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sanako (2023). Why role-play works in the language classroom. [online] Sanako Blog. Available at: <https://www.sanako.com/blog/why-roleplay-works> [Accessed 28 July 2025].
- Savignon, S.J. (2002). *Interpreting Communicative Language Teaching: Contexts and Concerns in Teacher Education*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sebarajah, M. (2017). Challenges in Implementing CLT in Sri Lankan Classrooms. *International Journal of English and Education*, 6 (3), pp.142-150.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wijesekera, D., 2016. Adapting Communicative Approaches to the Sri Lankan ESL Classroom: Cultural and Pedagogical Implications. *South Asian Journal of Education*, 10 (2), pp.55-70.