

Improving English Pronunciation of Bhutanese Esl Learners Using Creative Drama

Melam Zangmo and Ruedeerath Chusanachoti

Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Corresponding Author, E-mail: melamzangmotenzin@gmail.com

Abstracts

The aims of the study were (1) to compare the learners' English pronunciation ability before and after learning with creative drama, and (2) to explore the learners' opinion towards the implementation of creative drama instruction. Twenty-five Bhutanese ESL learners selected through cluster sampling, with a 12-week studying pronunciation using creative drama instruction. The English pronunciation ability test and interview were used to obtain qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative analyzed data included the mean scores, standard deviation, and Wilcoxon signed ranks test, and the qualitative data from the interview were analyzed using content analysis.

The results revealed that pronunciation ability was higher after studying with creative drama at the .05 level of significance ($z=-4.396^b$, $p=.000$). In the interview findings, all participants asserted a positive opinion towards creative drama instruction in both the improvement of their English pronunciation abilities and learning activities.

Keywords: Improving English Pronunciation; Creative Drama; Bhutanese ESL Learners

Introduction

The swelling globalization of world economies compels and requires for individuals to be able to communicate effectively in English as Crystal (2012 : 43) confirms English as the global language. It is essential to learn pronunciation for individuals to be operative communicators in the language they want to understand and be understood (Jenkins, 2017 : 52–68 ; Munro & Derwing, 2011 : 316–327). Pronunciation involves a multifaceted interactional factor which can be described in terms of two types of features: segmental features and suprasegmental features. Segmental deals with individual sounds of English and suprasegmental, also known as, prosody convey the whole meaning (Gilbert, 2018 : 1-9).

Bhutan recognizes the importance of English. In the quest, Bhutan has adopted English as its second official language. Thus, English is the medium of instruction at all levels of education across the country except for one National language class. On an average, learners have 7 periods of English subject lasting for 40 minutes per week. This means Bhutanese learners are more exposed to English language than the National language. However, this exposure is limited to the school boundaries unlike other ESL countries like Malaysia where English has a functional role of language of communication (Ramiza & Albion, 2013 : 23). Similarly, in Singapore, English is considered to have two parallel roles: as a universal language, and as a resident language (Alsagoff, 2010 : 336–348). To sum up, Bhutan does not share a typical ESL context, it is more of EFL context where L2 input is primarily restricted to curriculum offered.

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Consequently, Department of School Examinations and Assessment (2013 : online) has confirmed that Bhutanese learners lack English-speaking ability. On deeper investigation by Choeda et al. (2020 : 12-25), they concluded that lack of English-speaking ability is the repercussion of poor pronunciation. In the same study, it was reported that learners are not offered ample opportunities to practice pronunciation. Moreover, the majority of the learning standards for primary education drafted in English Curriculum has fluency as a focus. While fluent speaker may pronounce individual sounds differently from the norms, yet, encounter no problem with intelligibility, pronunciation accuracy strengthens the overall communication power (Gilakjani et al., 2011 : online). This calls for attention to pronunciation accuracy as Singay (2018:74) too highlighted the negligence of pronunciation teaching in Bhutan. The other factor is the result of fidelity to obsolete pronunciation teaching techniques. The teaching methods are teacher-centered, hardly innovative, and instructional practices are not constructive (Dendup & Onthanee, 2020 : 255–266). Thus, advance methods and applications need to be executed for improved performance.

Creative drama, in its broadest sense, is a realistic instruction that creates simulations with a group on the foundation of knowledge, involvements and skills through the use of techniques such as role-play and improvisation in any domain (ÖZek, 2016 : online). The intervention of creative drama in teaching pronunciation: segmental and suprasegmental will open alternative student-centered learning technique and incidental learning opportunity for learners providing authentic language use and maximizing the pronunciation practice. Creative drama, by virtue of its characteristics, is relevant to all levels of learners reaching from primary to secondary to bachelors (Chesner, 2020 : 7). Creative drama renders opportunity for learner centered learning whereby a leader or teacher leads to learning experiences, and the responsibility and willingness of learners in the class help each other to be successful equally. Creative drama sessions have contributed to achievement as well improvement of pronunciation ability of ESL/ EFL learners at large (Korkut & ÇElik, 2018 : 147-59; Tsybaneva et al., 2019 : online).

Accordingly, to combat the hindrances and enhance Bhutanese learners' pronunciation ability, creative drama will be used. Although few researches have been devoted to pronunciation, creative drama as instruction in teaching pronunciation has not been explored in the Bhutanese context. Hence, to address this gap, the objectives of this study is to compare the English pronunciation ability of upper primary learners before and after studying with creative drama, and explore the learners' opinion towards the use of creative drama.

Research Objectives

1. To compare the learners' English pronunciation ability before and after learning with creative drama.
2. To explore the learners' opinion towards the use of creative drama in pronunciation learning.

Research Methodology

1. Participants and context

One class of 6th graders consisting of 25 learners in Damthang Primary School was selected as the participant for this study through cluster sampling. Sixth grade learners were selected as the participants in response to one of the learning objectives of this grade mentioned in the English Curriculum to speak regularly with clear pronunciation. The participants were of mixed English ability undertaking English Curriculum developed by the Royal Education Council of Bhutan. Damthang Primary School is a medium sized public school. The school was selected through convenient sampling as researchers have access to the school.

2. Instruments

This research included three instruments:

Creative drama Unit plans: This instructional instrument was designed according to the three interrelated and complemented stages of creative drama. Three-unit plans were drafted based on three stories; Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Henny-Penny: The Sky is Falling, and The Emperor's New Clothes. Each unit plan took 3 weeks to complete, in which, learners indulged in 1 hour of In-class activity and 1 hour of Out-of-class activity per week. In-class activities aimed to build group dynamics, practice targeted pronunciation for role play or improvisation through interactive and communicative exercises as well carry out evaluation. Between the In-class activity, the participants were required to practice pronunciation during Out-of-class activity as per guidelines provided complementing In-class activity. The result of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) from three experts in the field of English language teaching was 0.81.

The English Pronunciation Ability Test: Two parallel English Pronunciation Ability Tests were developed to be administered before and after studying with creative drama instruction to assess the learners' English pronunciation ability. The learners were summoned one at a time to take the test which was to read the text with correct pronunciation and the learners were recorded. The test was designed to be assessed in two parts: Part A and Part B. For Part A, only underlined words in the text were objectively assessed for correct production of consonant or vowel or stressed syllable. There were 14 consonant sound items, 14 vowel sound items and 14 stressed syllables items. In Part B, intonation was assessed using pronunciation rubric developed by Benjamin (2012 : online). The Indexes of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) from three experts in the field of English language teaching was 0.91.

Interview: The face-to-face semi structured interview aimed to gain insightful information had 2 sets of questions. The first set was directed towards the learners' perception of their pronunciation improvement across the lessons. The second set explored their opinions on creative drama instruction for pronunciation learning. The interview was audio recorded. All the 25 participants of the study were interviewed to find a holistic opinion towards the use of creative drama in pronunciation teaching.

The quality of all instruments was validated by three experts in the field of English language teaching and afterwards, necessary revisions were made as per experts commands.

3. Data Collection

The data collection comprised of five stages:

1. The researcher obtained a signed consent form from parents or guardian as the participants of the study are below 18.
2. The pre-test was administered using the English Pronunciation Ability Test.
3. The creative drama intervention was implemented for 9 weeks.

4. The post-test, a parallel version of English Pronunciation Ability Test, was administrated.

5. The semi-structured, face-to-face, one person at a time, interview lasting for 5 to 7 minutes was conducted. The interviewees were given the choice to answer either in native language or English to avoid language barriers.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from Pre- and Post-test were analyzed using mean scores, standard deviation, and Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The interview was transcribed, then translated to English. Non-verbatim transcription was used to make the transcript more readable. Then, the transcripts were analyzed using content analysis.

Conceptual Framework

Pronunciation emphasis rarely continues past the initial level after language's alphabets and sound systems are introduced. In addition, if the focus continues, pronunciation is mostly taught via repetition drills and memorization of rules. Recently, scholars in the decade suggest to teach pronunciation in a communicative approach for better-quality result (Korkut & ÇElik, 2018 : 147-59; Tsybaneva et al., 2019 : online).

Through Creative Drama, meaningful and realistic context is offered in a communicative purpose, constantly prioritizing accuracy. Creative Drama entails two principles, namely, Communicative Language Learning (Ulas, 2008 : 876–880), and Cooperative Learning (Wyse et al., 2018 : 3). The three stages of Creative Drama proposed by Oguz Namdar & Kaya (2019 : 901–914.) includes (1) Preparation, (2) Animation, and (3) Evaluation. Therefore, in this study, Creative Drama is the independent variable and English pronunciation ability is the dependent variable as shown in the Figure 1.

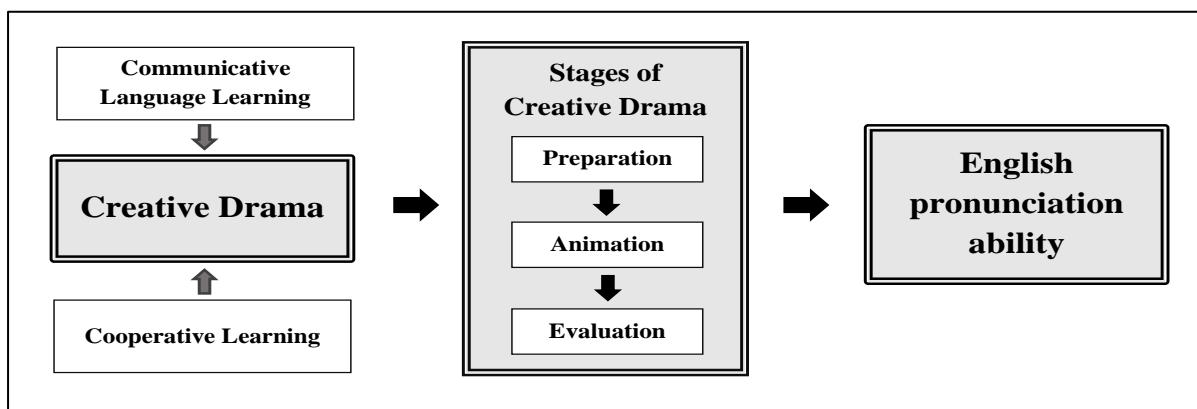


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Results

The findings of this study are presented based on the research questions as follows:

Research Question 1: How different is the learners' English pronunciation ability before and that after learning with creative drama?

The English Pronunciation Ability Tests were used to compare learners' English pronunciation ability before and after studying with creative drama.

Table 1: Mean, standard deviations, and the significance of pretest and posttest (n=25)

	Min (20)	Max (20)	\bar{x}	S. D	z	Asymp.Sig (2-tailed)
Pretest	7	13	9.64	1.680		
Posttest	11	18	14.08	2.080	- 4.396	.000

* $p < .05$

Table 1 indicates results of pretest and posttest administered before and after studying with creative drama of 25 Bhutanese ESL learners of 6th grade. As shown in the table, for the pretest, 7 was the minimum score, and 11 was the maximum score. For the posttest, 13 was the minimum score, and 18 was the maximum score. The maximum possible score was 20. The posttest mean score of 14.08 (S.D.= 2.080) was higher than the pretest mean score of 9.64 (S.D.= 1.680) by 4.44. There is a significant difference between the learners' performance before and after studying with Creative Drama, $z= - 4.396$, $p = .000$. Thus, with the statistical difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores, and the improvement in score range, creative drama has a positive effect on learners' English pronunciation ability Bhutanese ESL learners.

Research Question 2: What are the opinions of learners towards the use of creative drama in pronunciation learning?

The semi-structured interview was conducted which explored learners' opinion based on two aspects: (1) learners' perception of English pronunciation improvement across the lessons, and (2) Usefulness of creative drama instruction.

All the 25 interviewees validated their improvement in English pronunciation ability as concluded from the pre-posttest. The improvement indicated the clear positive effect of creative drama as excerpts revealed:

"I can say more words correctly than before. I can pronounce vowel sounds which were difficult for me before this class." (No.25, male)

"I vary my pitch to ask different questions, for some the pitch is higher at the end. Some words have to be said louder and longer than others in a sentence. I keep those in mind these days while speaking." (No.6, female)

As for the usefulness of creative drama, the participants shared similar views. Most pointed the fun of working together as a team and helping each other unlike in regular classes where they most of the time worked individually. Moreover, on asking them to specific the stage in creative drama, which they liked the most, many opted for animation.

“I enjoyed the games we played to practice pronunciation. I taught some of my friends to say the words correctly and some friends taught me. Our group won twice. It was interesting and fun.” (No.14, male)

“I practiced my role. I loved to act in front of the class. When I acted and delivered dialogues, I tried my best to say it clearly. For example, if I was a hungry boy, I talked like any hungry person would. If I play the character of a policeman, I would be having a commanding voice.” (No.10, female)

Based on the results of English pronunciation test and interview, it can be concluded that creative drama is operative instruction for the improvement of English pronunciation.

Discussion

Even though, speaking competence involves, fluency and accuracy, fluency is widely practiced in ESL / EFL classes in comparison with accuracy. It's undeniable that with fluency, one has the capacity to produce language. However, fluency at the expense of accuracy would result in long incoherent speech without any reasonably accurate production of speech (Thornbury, 2000 : 139–143). Derakhshan et al. (2016 : 177) shared the similar view of placing importance in accuracy for proficient speech. Thus, the study focused on accuracy to empower learners with enhanced pronunciation. The discussion is divided into two parts as per the two research questions.

1. Improved English pronunciation

As presented in the results, the learners' English pronunciation ability was statistically significant as an indicator of the effectiveness of Creative drama instruction. This result is consistent with that of Korkut & Çelik, (2018: 147–159) which showed a large effect on their participants after learning pronunciation with 18 hours of creative drama sessions. As per Abu-Latiff (2020), creative drama in ESL classrooms ease the study of often ignored aspects of language like pronunciation. Creative drama appears to contribute to enhanced pronunciation ability. The effect of improved pronunciation ability is similarly in line with the study of Narimanovna (2019: 92–93) who claimed that learners achieve the habit of acceptable English pronunciation and intonation in a stress-free environment. Creative drama positions the learners to take responsibilities to indulge in meaningful and purposeful communication.

2. Opinions of learners

With the analysis of learners' interview data, it was realized that all learners' English pronunciation improved. In all levels of education, creative drama contributes to improved pronunciation (Abu-Latiff, 2020: 48–55; Narimanovna, 2019: 92–93). There were two specific benefits of learning with creative drama surfaced from the interview data, namely, stress-free learning environment and peer interaction.

Stress-free learning environment

The learners portrayed a positive attitude towards the use of creative drama with a special mention of its stress-free environment, fun, and engaging nature. Tsybaneva et al. (2019 : online) reports that creative drama aids to forestall the use of pronunciation learning through recognition or repetition based mechanical drills, providing relaxed environment. Creative

drama assimilates a range of pronunciation features in a fully contextualized and interactional manner. Creative drama enables learners to put imaginary thoughts into action through role play or improvisation, allowing them to experiment with language contents with a low affective filter. As Ulubey (2018 : 63–78) notes that the process of exploring language skills through different characters in Creative drama leads to positive contribution to affective development which in turn enhances academic achievements. Creative drama provides learners with the opportunity to involve actively throughout its stages as a teacher is no more a dominating figure. As an effect, more students are willing to join Creative drama classes as stated in Ulas (2008 : 876–880).

Peer interaction

The learners also mentioned about their frequent robust involvement with classmates whereby they felt much relaxed which helped them in learning pronunciation without fear of judgements. Wyse et al. (2018 : 3) reviewed that creative drama aids learners to cooperate with their peer. Creative drama encourages effective participation of learners as it allows improvisation by sharing roles with other group members. This kind of interactions among the learners have resulted in increased desire to learn and increased self-confidence (Abu-Latiff, 2020 : 48–55). It has been noted that social skills are important aspects in any learning process. In Ulubey (2018 : 63–78), it is stated that peer assisted learning offered in creative drama can build social skills. The majority of the learners' responses in the interview asserted that creative drama is stress-free, engaging, and effective, as in Bsharat & Behak (2021 : 37–51); and Momeni et al. (2017 : 617) mentioned in their studies.

Conclusion

In this study, which was intended to compare learners' English pronunciation ability before and after studying with creative drama, the posttest scores were higher than the pretest. In addition to that, learners portrayed acceptance towards the use of creative drama instruction to learn pronunciation. Creative drama in learning pronunciation skills plays a constructive role by fostering positive conducts of expression and readiness to experiment with segmental (sounds) and suprasegmental (intonation).

Implications

On the bases of study findings and discussion, the study offers implications for English language teachers and practitioners interested to implement creative drama for pronunciation enhancement.

Firstly, it is vital to create a stress-free environment which can be done by building group dynamics so that learners are motivated to participate without inhibitions and the fear of criticism. Following Güryay (2019 : 127–134), the best way to help learners relax and stay focused is to introduce relaxation activities and games. Those activities and games should not only foster group dynamics but also get learners ready for the next step in the lesson. Another important aspect, the content selected should offer abundant targeted pronunciation practice and likewise consider the equal part allocation for learners. It is engaging and motivating for the learners in the process of learning.

Secondly, as the part of creative drama instruction, learners have to either role play or improvise a story. In the process, learners pick up the habit of expressing and experimenting more with sounds and intonation patterns (Korkut & Çelik, 2018 : 147–159) in a wider social context and different social roles (Mariani et al., 2020 : 39–52:). In addition, cooperative learning may occur as a higher-skilled one helps less-skilled in the group with clear pronunciation.

Finally, a critical evaluation of self-reflection along with feedback by and from a teacher can enhance pronunciation accuracy. With self-reflection, learners can keep track of their improvement and lacks. However, it is necessary for the teacher to model self-reflection for maximum positive effects. Although, common errors can be discussed as a whole class, feedback should be constructive and specific to the individual's pronunciation problem.

Limitation of the study

The present study employed one group pre- and posttest design. It had no control group to compare the findings. Even though, statistically significant overall improvement in pronunciation was note, the researcher did not examine the range of improvement of individual pronunciation aspects. Moreover, the number of participants in the study is rather considered to be small scale. The study also did not explore English teachers' opinion towards the use of creative drama in pronunciation learning.

Recommendation for Further Research

It would be rather stimulating to have a control group to further confirm the results of the present study. Given the obvious result of the study, creative drama being beneficial for upper primary learners' English pronunciation ability, studies can examine further as to which aspect of pronunciation improved the most and can be conducted with a population at different levels with larger number. Additionally, it would be judicious if English teachers lent their opinions on the use of creative drama as intervention.

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