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Journal Aim and Scope

The Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka (JOVPA-SL) is a biannual research publication issued by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. The journal seeks to capture a broad spectrum of scholarly work in the fields of visual and performing arts, while also promoting multidisciplinary approaches within the humanities and social sciences. JOVPA-SL welcomes contributions from both academics and practitioner-researchers engaged in arts-based research, fostering critical dialogue and innovative perspectives on creative practice and inquiry. It serves as a platform for critical engagement, experimental methodologies, and creative pedagogy, addressing themes that are either discipline-specific such as dance, drama, performance studies, music, or visual arts or situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines. The journal invites original, rigorous, and meaningful research in creative arts and performance studies, both within and across academic boundaries. It encourages critical debate and cross-disciplinary exchange through diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to: theatre studies, performance studies, dance studies, ethnomusicology, music education, popular culture, dance and movement analysis, art history, art theory, visual and cultural studies, crafts, digital arts and design, film studies, and fine arts.

Cover Photo: Final Year Dance Production, '*Oracle'* performed in 2018 at Panibharatha Theatre. Dept. of Theatre, and Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance.

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Teaching Drama across Cultures: Navigating the Global South–North Translation Challenge

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, educational researchers often undertake higher studies in western universities, collecting data in their home countries and languages before engaging in analysis in the language of their academic institution. While this process seems straightforward in theory, the reality—especially in the arts and humanities—is riddled with complexities. The act of translation becomes a site of negotiation, not merely linguistic but also cultural, cognitive, and methodological. This article reflects on the intricate challenges encountered during a doctoral study involving Process Drama in Sri Lanka, conducted under an Australian academic framework. It delves into the multifaceted issues of linguistic translation, cultural interpretation, and methodological integrity that emerged when attempting to adapt and analyse creative arts education interventions in a cross-cultural context. Using a mixed-method approach, including pilot studies, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and intervention feedback, the study critically interrogates the limitations of traditional translation practices and reveals the necessity for culturally nuanced and methodologically reflective frameworks in arts-based educational research. The insights offered aim to inform future cross-cultural research practices, especially within the creative arts, where meaning is deeply rooted in cultural context and expressive practice.

KEYWORDS

Back translation, cultural difference, cross-cultural research, creative pedagogy, drama education, process drama, translation, Sinhala-English, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Completing my PhD at a Western academic institution was both a prestigious and transformative journey. While intellectually rewarding, it presented significant challenges—particularly because my primary data collection took place in a non-Western, non-English-speaking context. In such settings, translation became an indispensable tool—not merely for linguistic accuracy but for preserving the richness, context, and intent of the original data. As a result, the translation process carried considerable methodological significance, especially within the humanities and creative arts, where meanings are often nuanced, symbolic, and culturally embedded.

This article stems from my doctoral research in the field of Process Drama—a pedagogical approach that uses dramatic techniques to explore issues and foster creative engagement. Although I conducted the study in Sri Lanka, it was framed, supervised, and assessed within the academic structure of an Australian university. Throughout the research, I encountered multiple challenges, not only in translating language but also in reframing pedagogical concepts and practices to align with both cultural contexts. These challenges extended beyond mere linguistic barriers and deeply influenced the way drama-based education was understood and implemented.

While I recognize that Back Translation (BT) is a well-established method in cross-language research, I have found its application in creative disciplines such as Process Drama to be significantly underexplored. BT typically involves translating a document from the source language into the target language and then re-translating it back to check for consistency, as outlined by Lincoln and Gonzálezy González (2008). However, in my experience working in performative fields—where meaning is co-constructed through gesture, tone, cultural references, and lived experience—I have observed that such linear techniques often fall short. I have also noticed how the assumed universality of pedagogical models from the Global North can obscure the epistemological and methodological tensions that surface in Southern contexts, where language and meaning are deeply embedded in different cultural matrices.

In this paper, I unpack these tensions through a detailed account of

a Process Drama intervention I conducted with Grade 7 students in Sri Lankan government schools. I examine how translation difficulties—relating not only to language but also to educational concepts and pedagogical practices—shaped the research process. Drawing on personal reflections, interview data, and classroom observations, I argue for a more flexible and culturally sensitive approach to translation in educational research, particularly in the arts. The sections that follow detail the research design, the linguistic and cultural translation strategies I employed, and the challenges I encountered during various phases of the intervention. Ultimately, this work aims to offer insights into how we can conduct cross-cultural research in creative education contexts more ethically and effectively.

DATA TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

In qualitative research, particularly in cross-cultural settings, translation is far more than a mechanical act of replacing words from one language to another. It is a deeply interpretive process that shapes how knowledge is constructed, communicated, and understood. In my study, the translation of interviews, classroom discussions, and written reflections from Sinhala into English played a central role in ensuring the validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research. However, in the context of Process Drama - a pedagogical approach rooted in performance, improvisation, and cultural symbolism - translation presented unique challenges that demanded careful methodological attention.

Sri Lanka's linguistic heritage introduced additional layers of complexity to my research. The dominant language, Sinhala, is diglossic, comprising both formal and informal variants. While native speakers navigate this duality effortlessly, translating these nuances into English—which lacks a comparable diglossic structure—presented significant challenges. In particular, conveying tone, emotion, and culturally embedded references proved difficult. As Liamputtong (2010) and Agustian et al. (2014) suggest, preserving the fidelity of translated qualitative data requires translators to be not just bilingual, but also bicultural—able to mediate between both linguistic and cultural frameworks.

To navigate these challenges, I adopted a two-tiered translation strategy. Initially, I translated all qualitative materials—including interview transcripts and group discussions—into English. My fluency in both Sinhala and English, along with my deep immersion in the Sri Lankan cultural context, enabled me to retain much of the cultural nuance and accurately interpret participants' intentions. To enhance accuracy and ensure trustworthiness, I then collaborated with a certified bilingual translator based in Australia, who performed back translations. This approach reflects best practices highlighted by Son (2018) and Colina et al. (2017).

Given the absence of standardized guidelines in the literature regarding who should perform back translations—especially between Sinhala and English—I developed a context-sensitive approach informed by insights from Wild et al. (2005) and others. Lincoln and Guba (1985) underscore trustworthiness as a foundational criterion in qualitative inquiry. In cross-language research, this extends beyond the data to encompass the translation processes on which findings depend (Agustian et al., 2014). With this in mind, I prioritized translation procedures that preserved the cultural integrity of the original (Sri Lankan) context while maintaining academic clarity and accessibility in the Australian research setting.

Squires (2009) provides valuable criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of cross-language qualitative research, emphasizing the importance of clearly outlining both the researcher's language competence and the credentials of any translators involved. In line with this guidance, all twenty interview transcripts in my study were back-translated by an officially certified Sinhalese–English translator based in Australia.

While Squires (2009) also recommends beginning data analysis in the participants' original language, I made a deliberate decision to deviate from this approach for two key reasons. First, my supervisory team consisted of English speakers who would not have been able to engage meaningfully with data presented in Sinhala. At that stage of the research, their input was crucial in helping me identify emerging themes and patterns. Second, I sought to ensure consistency and transparency in my research process, which led me to translate all interview transcripts into English prior to commencing

thematic analysis.

To manage this translation phase, I personally translated all pre- and post-test papers, interviews, and group discussion transcripts, drawing on my bilingual fluency in Sinhala and English. To further enhance the accuracy and professional quality of the translations, I collaborated with a registered professional translator based in Queensland, who completed additional translation tasks in both directions—English to Sinhala and Sinhala to English. This collaborative process ensured that the final versions were both linguistically sound and culturally appropriate.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE

I conducted this research as the first non-randomised controlled trial aimed at evaluating a Process Drama intervention program for Grade 7 drama students in Sri Lanka. The study sample included 145 students, aged 11 to 12, and six drama teachers from three government schools. These schools were purposefully selected based on their willingness to implement drama-based pedagogy and their basic familiarity with elements of Process Drama. To ensure consistency across the study, I chose schools with similar socio-economic characteristics.

The intervention group participated in 20 custom-designed lessons that incorporated Process Drama techniques such as hot-seating, improvisation, and role-play. These activities were specifically developed to foster everyday creativity, adaptability, and student engagement.

Teacher preparedness and commitment were essential to the success of the intervention. To support this, I conducted an intensive training session for the participating teachers, which covered both the theoretical foundations and practical applications of Process Drama. However, introducing this methodology into Sri Lankan classrooms - where didactic teaching methods and examination-oriented instruction dominate - posed significant pedagogical challenges.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of an Australian university. This reflected the dual-governance structure of the project, a common feature of

Global South–North research collaborations. However, this structure also introduced additional layers of bureaucratic and cultural negotiation.

Ultimately, the design and implementation of this intervention revealed not only pedagogical and linguistic challenges but also systemic barriers. Issues such as rigid curricula, high-stakes assessment pressures, and limited infrastructure significantly constrained the transformative potential of creative education in the Sri Lankan context.

RESULTS CHALLENGE 1: TRANSLATING PEDAGOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The initial pilot study, which I conducted in Queensland, Australia, was a formative step in refining the proposed intervention. Twelve Grade 7 students participated in this small-scale trial, led by an experienced drama teacher. While the pilot affirmed the general feasibility of using Process Drama techniques with students of this age, it also revealed a series of cultural and pedagogical assumptions embedded within Western teaching models.

In the Australian classroom, the drama pedagogy was rooted in child-centred learning, emphasizing exploration, emotional expression, and collaborative creativity. The teacher employed strategies such as group observation, positive modelling, and promoting student autonomy - values that sharply contrasted with the teacher-led, examination-driven approach that prevails in Sri Lankan schools. As Morin (2013) notes, pilot studies often expose unanticipated implementation challenges, and in this case, the cultural divide between drama education philosophies became immediately evident.

Even the term Process Drama was unfamiliar in the Sri Lankan context, both linguistically and conceptually. Although I had substantial experience teaching Aesthetic Education, I was only introduced to this particular drama pedagogy upon beginning my doctoral studies in Australia. This late exposure highlighted a significant conceptual gap, which was further reinforced by the pilot teacher's feedback. She found the activities engaging but considered them more suitable for a younger age group than Grade 7. Her comments pointed

to assumptions about developmental appropriateness and curricular norms that did not translate easily across educational systems.

This pilot study proved to be pivotal. It exposed not only logistical and content-related issues, but also fundamental philosophical mismatches between the pedagogical intentions of the intervention and the expectations of students, teachers, and the broader educational system in Sri Lanka. It became clear that for the intervention to succeed, it would need to bridge these conceptual and cultural divides with great care.

CHALLENGE 2: TRANSLATING CONCEPTS, NOT JUST LANGUAGE

Designing an intervention manual that was both culturally and linguistically appropriate emerged as the next major challenge. The 20-lesson curriculum I developed incorporated core Process Drama techniques such as hot-seating, improvisation, and storytelling - each rooted in pedagogies of exploration, ambiguity, and open-ended inquiry. Translating these techniques into Sinhala turned out to be far more complex than finding lexical equivalents.

Sinhala, as a diglossic language, posed particular difficulties due to its dual formal and informal registers. This made it challenging to choose the appropriate linguistic tone for educational materials. Terms like "process" and "hot-seat" had no direct cultural or functional counterparts in Sinhala. To address this, I coined the term *Kriyawalle Natayaya* (ක්‍රියාවලි නාට්‍ය) to represent "Process Drama," attempting to convey its dynamic, experiential nature. Similarly, I created *Vichra Asana* (විචාර ආසනය) for "hot-seat," blending the ideas of inquiry and performance. While these neologisms were innovative, they still required significant contextual scaffolding to make sense to Sri Lankan teachers and students unfamiliar with the concepts.

Choosing the content also posed a methodological dilemma. Sri Lankan drama education traditionally follows a content-heavy model focused on examination preparation and rote memorization. In contrast, Process Drama emphasizes reflection, experience, and creativity. In this environment, both teachers and students equated "con-

tent" with "notes" to be memorized - a perception often reinforced by parental expectations. Balancing the introduction of core drama concepts with the realities of this content-driven system required a careful negotiation between innovation and institutional constraints.

These translation challenges extended well beyond language. They involved adapting an entire pedagogical worldview, one that values creativity, improvisation, and emotional authenticity into an educational system that prioritizes uniformity, predictability, and academic performance.

CHALLENGE 3: TRANSLATING INTO PRACTICE

Despite extensive preparation, the rollout of the intervention surfaced practical challenges that lay at the heart of cross-cultural educational research. Although the participating teachers were experienced in drama education, many felt unprepared for the methodological shift that Process Drama demanded. Weekly interviews and classroom observations revealed their struggles with lesson planning, time management, and staying faithful to the intervention manual.

Several teachers admitted to reverting to traditional habits—delivering content through lectures, skipping lesson plans, and managing student passivity with rigid direction rather than open-ended exploration. These responses were not due to resistance but to deeply ingrained systemic pressures. As Efland (2004) and Eisner (2002) argue, effective creative arts education requires not only subject knowledge but also a willingness to take aesthetic and cognitive risks - traits often discouraged in Sri Lanka's exam-centric system.

Time constraints and curricular overload further exacerbated the challenges. Teachers frequently found it difficult to complete the lessons within the scheduled time, citing frequent delays and a lack of dedicated drama spaces. More troubling was the psychological resistance from students, many of whom had internalized the belief that creativity held less value than academic content. Some even questioned how Process Drama would help them perform better in exams, a sentiment echoed by their parents.

Teacher feedback underscored this dilemma. One teacher, despite over a decade of experience, admitted she had never consistently

used lesson plans, relying instead on recycled notes. Another expressed anxiety about deviating from the official Teachers' Guide. These responses reflected a deeper struggle between professional aspiration and institutional inertia, showing just how difficult it is to enact pedagogical change without systemic support.

These practical obstacles were more than logistical concerns - they revealed deeper epistemological tensions between contrasting visions of education. They highlighted the necessity of aligning educational innovations with the values, expectations, and structural realities of local contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings from my study highlight the profound challenges of conducting educational research and implementing pedagogical interventions across cultural and linguistic boundaries. While the intervention showed promise, engaging students and introducing teachers to new modes of creative expression, the research process revealed a complex landscape of translation. This translation extended beyond words; it involved concepts, educational ideologies, and deeply rooted systemic expectations.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC MEDIATION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Teacher feedback and classroom observations made it clear that assuming educational concepts like Process Drama can be transferred seamlessly across cultural contexts is fundamentally flawed. Language is not merely a system of signs, it is a cultural framework that carries embedded epistemologies, social norms, and power structures (Lincoln & Gonzalez, 2008). This view aligns with Colina et al. (2017), who argue that translation must be seen as a dynamic, purpose-driven process, rather than a simple act of linguistic equivalence.

In my study, even with the use of best practices such as back translation and professional review, I could not fully bridge the interpretive gap between Sinhala and English, or between Australian pedagogi-

cal frameworks and Sri Lankan classroom realities. The neologisms I developed—Kriyawalle Natayaya for "Process Drama" and Vichra Asana for "hot-seat"—were examples of the kind of adaptive innovation required when working across conceptual systems that lack shared foundations.

However, language was only part of the challenge. I also had to consider teachers' professional identities, everyday classroom routines, and the assessment-driven culture as cultural artifacts themselves. As Craft (2003) and Jeffrey & Craft (2004) point out, there is a meaningful distinction between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity. Each requires different pedagogical mindsets and institutional conditions. Attempting to translate these concepts into a context dominated by rote learning and exam-oriented teaching was not only difficult but often culturally dissonant.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

Introducing change in rigid, centrally controlled education systems is rarely straightforward. In Sri Lanka, as in many postcolonial nations, the education system heavily emphasizes standardized testing and content delivery. As a result, teachers operate within a framework that prioritizes measurable academic outcomes over experiential or creative learning. From my interviews, it became evident that deviation from prescribed formats, such as the official curriculum or Teachers' Guide, often attracted scrutiny from administrators, parents, and even students.

Teachers' reluctance to use detailed lesson plans or depart from traditional practices was not due to lack of training or motivation. Rather, it reflected systemic conditioning that favours conformity over pedagogical innovation. Teachers are ultimately held accountable for exam results—not for fostering creativity or engagement. As Robinson (2011) and Efland (2004) argue, this accountability model is fundamentally misaligned with the goals of arts education, which require ambiguity, inquiry, and personal expression.

This systemic tension was also evident in student attitudes. Many students saw creative tasks as distractions from what really mattered,

exam preparation. This perception was reinforced by parents who gauged academic success strictly by grades and test performance. These findings echo broader research in Global South contexts, where creative pedagogies are often sidelined unless they clearly contribute to exam achievement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

These findings hold important implications for international researchers, particularly those working in creative fields. As Squires (2009) and Liamputtong (2010) emphasize, qualitative research in cross-cultural contexts must address not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural credibility. This means rethinking how we design, implement, and analyse educational interventions. It also involves recognizing the value of including local stakeholders, teachers, students, translators, not just as participants, but as co-creators of meaning.

One of the most important insights I gained is that educational translation must be dialogic. Pedagogical practices cannot simply be imported from one context to another. Instead, they must be negotiated, reshaped, and sometimes reimagined through ongoing dialogue with local values, expectations, and traditions. This requires humility, methodological flexibility, and a deep respect for the educational landscapes in which we work.

My experience in Sri Lanka reinforced the value of such engagement. Despite the many challenges, I witnessed moments of transformation, teachers reflecting critically on their methods, students experimenting with new forms of expression, and myself as a researcher gaining a deeper, more reflexive understanding of educational translation. These small shifts, while subtle, point to the potential for long-term change, provided there is continued support, collaboration, and sustained critical reflection.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the multifaceted challenges involved in

translating both language and educational ideas across cultural contexts, particularly within the creative and pedagogically rich domain of Process Drama. Through my doctoral research, conducted in Sri Lanka under the academic framework of an Australian university, I explored the methodological, linguistic, and cultural complexities that arise in cross-cultural educational interventions. In doing so, I aimed to contribute to broader conversations around international research practices and qualitative methodologies in education.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a central paradox: while educational innovation often draws from global models, its success depends on local relevance. My attempt to transfer Process Drama techniques, developed within Western educational paradigms, into the Sri Lankan school system revealed significant tensions. These included cultural mismatches in teaching and learning practices, linguistic translation difficulties, and resistance rooted in an examination-driven educational culture.

The process of translation, both literal and conceptual, emerged as profoundly complex. While back translation and professional linguistic review were necessary, they were not sufficient on their own. These technical processes needed to be accompanied by cultural interpretation, pedagogical adaptation, and critical reflexivity. In this context, translation was not just about accuracy; it was about preserving meaning, aligning with local realities, and maintaining pedagogical integrity.

What this research ultimately demonstrates is that meaningful educational reform, particularly in creative subjects like Drama, requires more than curriculum development or teacher training. It calls for a fundamental shift in values: a rethinking of what it means to learn, to teach, and to create. The resistance I encountered from both teachers and students was not due to ignorance or unwillingness, but rather the result of systemic pressures that equate educational success with standardization and test performance. Until these expectations shift to value creativity, emotional depth, and process-oriented learning, approaches like Process Drama will continue to sit at the margins of mainstream education.

Despite these challenges, this study also revealed moments of genuine transformation. Teachers began experimenting with new

methods; students responded positively to creative engagement; and schools showed openness to unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. These moments -though small- offer meaningful indicators that change is possible. They suggest that with sustained support, collaboration, and critical reflection, creative education can find a stronger footing even in traditionally rigid systems.

In an increasingly globalized educational landscape, the need for intercultural understanding, adaptive translation practices, and ethically grounded research is more urgent than ever. My experience serves as a reminder that knowledge production in education must be both global and local, deeply attuned to the intricacies of language, culture, and human expression.

As educators, researchers, and practitioners engage in international collaborations and interventions, I offer this work as both a caution and an invitation: a caution against the uncritical transfer of pedagogical models, and an invitation to embrace translation as a creative, ethical, and dialogic process, one that honours the complexity of communication and the transformative power of drama education.

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