

Strengthening the Concept of Character Development in Acting: Lessons from Amateur Actors of English Theatre in Sri Lanka



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Abstract

This study was focused on strengthening the concept of character development among amateur actors of English theatre in Sri Lanka. The study was based on the research objectives of, to understand what character development is and its impact in acting, to analyse the current approaches being undertaken in developing characters in acting in Sri Lanka, to evaluate the current problems encountered in the area of development of characters in acting in Sri Lanka, to compare and contrast the character development processes undertaken by actors performing in different performing contexts in Sri Lanka, to present recommendations that can be made in the area of strengthening the development of characters in acting in Sri Lanka. This is a qualitative study that has utilized descriptive statistical summaries based on the research philosophy of interpretivism and utilized the inductive approach. Non-probability sampling technique was utilized with convenience sampling as the selected technique. The study was conducted among 30 individuals for semi-structured interviews. The study also included a focus group discussion. The results proved that the majority of the respondents highlighted weaknesses in the area of character development, particularly with regard to training, awareness, resources, and opportunities. The conclusion of the study included a basic and surface-level awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the subject of character development with limited application to relevant theories, concepts, and a personalized approach to character development, a lack of resources, trainings, and collaboration, the audience being aware of flawed characterizations and the overall need and support for the improvement of character development in the Sri Lankan theatre setting.

Keywords

Amateur Actors, Character Development, Drama Education, Sri Lankan English Theatre

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Introduction

Character development in acting has been both an area of interest and difficulty for some young actors during their studies (Sharma, 2016). Due to the lack of resources, teachers who are competent and knowledgeable in this area in Sri Lanka sometimes Sri Lankan students of acting can find the concept of character development quite challenging, and as implied by (Sharma, 2016), students need to embark on a more personalized approach that can be utilized when performing various characters and roles in stage acting in Sri Lanka.

Teaching and coaching students in stage acting on the concept of effective character development can be challenging when communicating and disseminating this knowledge in a way that amateur actors can understand. Hence, the need for this study arose more intently, due to the significant lack of resources, training, and support Sri Lankan teachers of acting have been bearing with for many years (Sharma, 2016).

As presented by Rainer (2005), character development, also known as characterization, is the skill and ability of the actor to embark on a process or journey that will enable him or her to take on a role of another character that is quite different from their own personality, experience, and environment. As brought to light by (Törnqvist, 2007), in engaging in this exciting yet challenging process of character development, actors will be required to characterize the character in the areas of physical representation in terms of physical features, vocal expressions and modulations, costumes, gestures etc when creating believable characters through the skill of spontaneity in acting and finally bringing together through synthesis and integration the two aspects of both internal and external aspects of character development. As further explained by Leach (2004), when this process is not sufficiently taught, directed, understood, and executed during an acting performance, the actors will find their performances to be monotonous, mundane, lacking in skill, spontaneity, and confidence, which will affect the overall quality and success of the drama production as well.

Hence, this study plays an important role in critically examining and analysing the existing theories and academic research in this regard in order to explore approaches to developing more personalized and unique approaches to character development that young amateur stage actors of English Theatre in Sri Lanka can easily utilize. Thus, the context of this study is character development for Sri Lankan amateur actors of English theatre.

According to Schmid (1984), characterization, also known as character development in some contexts, is a device of both drama and literature that functions as a progressive device to highlight, explain, and build details about a character in a story. As evident in most drama scripts, the character, when first introduced into the story, is identified with general characteristics, which become more specific and highlighted as the character progresses and develops in the world of the play (Hamilton, 2013). It is firstly the behavior and mannerisms of the character that are presented along with any physical appearances of the character, and thereafter, as the character gathers more momentum in the story, the internal dynamic in terms of the emotions, processes of thought, and psyche of the character is brought out with great significance within the world of the play (Storm, 2011).

As further explained by (McIlrath, 1955), the next step in character development or characterization is the interaction of the character with other characters which can be in the form of friendships, relationships, arguments, in the expressing of the views, ideas, opinions and perspectives of the characters regarding a particular subject matter being discussed in the world of the play, conversations of the character with other characters, lifestyle and behavior patterns of the character with various other characters in the world of the play. Yet another aspect of the character is demonstrated through the other character's response, views, opinions, perspectives and interactions with other characters in the play, which also adds another dynamic to the character development of a character (Kornfeld & Leyden, 2011).

Another definition of character development, as explained by Fischer-Lichte (2002), draws reference from the middle of the 15th century, which makes the claim of being the first time during which this term and idea of character development, also known as characterization, were put together. During this era, the plot of the storyline in the play was given more prominence over the characters as a result of the influence of Aristotle, who made the argument that the tragic aspects of drama represent the nature of life fueled by the actions of human beings and is thus not a case of human beings alone (Denning, 1993). However, the 19th century brought about a change in this school of thought, with more importance and dominance being given to the respective characters and their development in the world of the play as opposed to the plot. This was a significant feature of both plays and novels written during this time (Brown, 1963).

As pointed out by Panet (2015), there are two main ways of developing characters, and they are known as direct or explicit development of characters or indirect or implicit development of characters. In the direct or explicit development of characters, as the name implied the

approach is quite straightforward and clear as the respective character is built through the usage of other characters, narrative voice in the script of the play or if it is the protagonist of the play, the protagonist itself can explain to the audience the nature of his/her character, character traits, perspectives, opinions, ideas, decisions, reason and rationale for the choices made and behaviors displayed (Burgoyne, 2018).

Furthermore, as explained by Namazova (2021), indirect or implicit development of characters utilizes a more discreet and subtle approach to the development of character or characterization. In this approach the audience is given the task of interpreting and drawing reference to the nature, personality and character traits of the respective character by watching, observing, thinking and pondering on the character's behaviors, movements, mannerisms, conversations with other characters in the play, monologues, which gives an insight into the thought processes and psyche of the characters, appearance and the attitudes and reactions of other characters to the respective character (Sokel, 1971).

According to Merlin (2018), the Stanislavski method of acting and character development is one of the world's most revered and widely followed approaches, as it brings together some useful and important guidance for acting and effective acting techniques and methodologies studied, developed, and practiced by senior and seasoned actors, theatre practitioners, and teachers of acting. In many parts of the world, the Stanislavsky method of acting and character development is considered to embody the basics of acting and character development (Merlin, 2018).

As pointed out by Gordon (2010), the Stanislavski method of acting and character development, at its essence, focuses on preparing and enabling actors to sharpen their skills as actors by encouraging them to view themselves as blank canvases so that they can experience a great sense of freedom and openness to the script and storyline that is presented to them. This sense of freedom needs to penetrate the actor's body, mind, heart, and soul, enabling him/her to truthfully embody the character he/she is to perform while being one with the respective character (Moore, 1984).

As presented by French (2016), the Stanislavsky method is centered on five main principles of psycho-physicality, discipline and commitment, concentration, attention, breathing and relaxation, and ethics in stage acting. In the first principle of psycho-physicality, the mind, along with the imagination and conscience, is connected to the physical body, which directs the movements and gestures of the physical body. When the actor's mind and physical body

are closely and meaningfully connected within the context of the character being played, the flow and execution of the performance become meaningful and spontaneous (Shevtsova, 2010).

The next principle under the method of Stanislavsky in acting and character development as explained by Norvelle, (1962), is the discipline of the actor in the context of disciplining the physical body of the actor to represent the physical appearance of the character being performed, disciplining the psychology of the actor so that the actor will be able to comprehend the similarities and differences between him/herself and the character being performed, disciplining the imagination of the actor in order to enhance the actor's existing skills and abilities to give further enrichment and meaning to the character being performed and the developing of the sense of responsibility in a collective manner for oneself as well as one's fellow actors and cast members to support, build, encourage and even constructively criticize the craft and skills of fellow actors.

The other principle under the method of Stanislavsky in acting and character development, as stated by French (2016), is concentration and attention of the actor. Much of human concentration and attention is based on the human mind, and hence taming the human mind to bring it to a point of clear and concentrated focus is a challenge that every actor has to face and overcome in order for the performance to be a success. When this principle has been mastered, actors will experience less stress, tension, frustration, and anxiety when performing their characters on stage as their minds and bodies have completely submerged in the world of their respective characters (Merlin, 2018).

The next principle under the method of Stanislavsky in acting and character development, as brought to light by French (2016), is breathing and relaxation. This, done correctly, will enable the actor to inhabit his/her blank canvas and the inner state of creativity that is required in the effective enhancement and interpretation of the character. The absence of effective breathing and relaxation methods will result in the actor's worst nightmare: stage fright and nerves. Hence, actors are encouraged to explore and utilize correct breathing techniques and adopt relaxation methods and mechanisms that help them relax and stay calm before and during the performance on stage (Mumford, 2018).

The final principle under the method of Stanislavsky in acting and character development, as brought out by French (2016), is ethics in stage acting. It is of paramount importance for actors to be conscious and bear personal responsibility for themselves during rehearsals, as well as

during the performance and when out of the performing space. Furthermore, being prepared for the day's rehearsal and work while maintaining a positive and respectful attitude towards one's fellow actors are important aspects of ethics for actors (Kutz, 2000).

Upon critical analysis of the above explanations, it is evident that all concepts and definitions have been well explained in a condensed manner. However, the principle of discipline has proven to be a challenge sometimes for amateur actors, when performing and when teaching this to amateur actors as this method does not fully provide a detail approach on the best method of disciplining the psychology as it requires a more personalized approach given that every actor's psychology is different and may needed to be understood and disciplined in ways that are unique and relevant to them in their roles as actors (Kirby, 1972). Yet another area of difficulty is with the principle of concentration and attention, especially with amateur actors who have constant difficulty in bringing their concentration levels to focus on a particular point of relevance during their performances, leading to stage fright, tension, frustration, and anxiety, which inevitably diminishes the overall quality of their performances on stage (Burgoyne, 2018).

According to Joe Deer and Rocco Del Vera (Deer & Del Vera, 2008), internal characterization is the inner process undertaken by the actor to embody the character through the understanding and internalizing the internal aspects of the character in terms of the thoughts, feelings, psyche, intentions, super-objective, and sub-objectives of the character within the world of the drama. As further stated by Brockmann (2021), this concept is said to be the most challenging aspect in the world of character development as it requires much knowledge, skills, practice, and experience to master and develop processes and mechanisms that will suit the respective actor in his/her varying acting roles and contexts.

As presented by Trevor Griffiths (Griffiths, 1998), external characterization is the outward aspect of the embodiment of the character based on the physical appearance, costumes, props, gestures, movements, behaviors, and speech patterns of the respective character the actor is preparing to embody. As explained by Trevor Griffiths (Griffiths, 1998), external characterization is not only the responsibility of the actor, as it calls for the contribution of several other creative professionals such as make-up artists, costume designers, hairdressers, accent and dialect coaches (when necessary), etc. However, the movement and speech aspect of this process lies in the embodiment of the actor and requires much skill, knowledge, understanding, interpretation, and respect for the character.

As brought to light by Brown (1963), characters in a play are rarely solitary characters and are highly interactive with the other characters on stage, hence interpersonal characterization. In keeping with the personality and situational circumstances of the respective character, the interaction of the characters with the other characters on stage may change and vary, and vice versa with the other characters' response to the respective character. As further explained by (Brown, 1963), similar to real life, characters in a play are also significantly influenced and impacted by the opinions, ideas, behaviors, responses, and relationships with other characters on stage with them. This is also an important area in the characterization process that needs to be thought of separately from the internal and external aspects of characterization, as certain character traits and personality traits of the respective character may change based on the influence other characters have on him/her in the world of the play (Brockmann, 2021).

The research gap of this study stems from the fact that, at present, Sri Lanka does not have many academic and professional studies conducted in the area of developing and strengthening the concept of character development in Sri Lankan English theatre explicitly addressed for amateur actors. Hence, much of the required understanding, knowledge, insight, and inspiration for the process of character development is drawn from wider international sources, mostly available online. However, there is a need for more specific approaches and mechanisms to be employed in the area of guiding actors to personalize character development approaches to meet the needs of specific actors and acting requirements necessary for the specific roles carried out. This is of particular importance when acting in roles in plays that have been written by local writers for more localized roles.

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

- To understand the nature of character development and the manner in which it impacts the process of acting in Sri Lanka.
- To analyse the current approaches that are being undertaken in the development of characters for performance in Sri Lanka.
- To evaluate the perceived issues faced in the area of development of characters in acting in Sri Lanka.
- To compare and contrast the character development processes undertaken by actors performing in different performing contexts in Sri Lanka.
- To present recommendations that can be made in the area of strengthening the development of character in acting in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

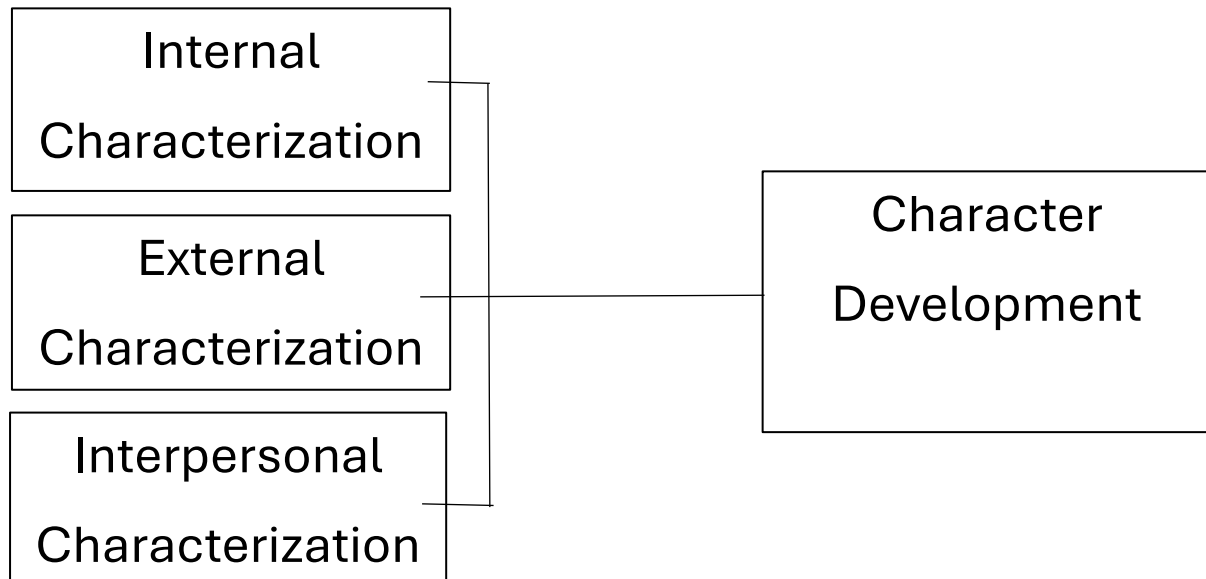


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework has three dependent variables and one independent variable. The independent variable is Character Development. This independent variable has a direct relationship with the dependent variables of internal characterization, external characterization, and interpersonal characterization. According to Gallagher and Neelands (2013), much of the process of character development in acting takes place before the performance, and it is the execution of this preparation that is presented on stage by actors, as there is hardly any time to give thought to character development, let alone to build it during the performance. As such, character development can be defined as a comprehensive process that requires concrete preparation, understanding, and interpretation on the part of the actor.

The first dependent variable in this conceptual framework is internal characterization, and this dependent variable has a direct relationship with the independent variable of character development. As brought out by Deer and Rocco (2008), internal characterization is the inner process the actor follows to embody the respective character through the comprehension and internalizing of the character's inner aspects of the character, such as the psyche, intentions, thoughts, feelings, super-objective, and sub-objectives of the character within the play.

The second dependent variable in this conceptual framework is external characterization, and this dependent variable has a direct relationship with the independent variable of character development. As brought out by Trevor Griffiths (Griffiths, 1998), external characterization is

showcased through the external aspects of costumes, props, gestures, movement, physical appearance, and speech patterns of the respective character in performance.

The third dependent variable is interpersonal characterization, and this dependent variable has a direct relationship with the independent variable of character development. As brought to light by Brown (1963), in keeping in line with the specific personality and situational circumstance of the respective character, the interaction of the characters with the other characters on stage may change and vary, and vice versa with the other characters' response to the respective character as characters, in a play have to carry out a variety of interactions with other characters.

Research Assumption

Current approaches to character development in acting do not provide any guidance for the personalization of these approaches for amateur actors. This research assumption was formulated to be tested as there is a gap in the current research available in Sri Lanka in the area of character development in acting as they only provide a broad understanding of the processes that can be employed in character development but do not provide any specific guidance on the personalization of these approaches to suit the acting needs, requirements, roles and contexts of actors, specifically in Sri Lanka.

Research Philosophy

The Interpretivism (interpretivist) research philosophy was used in this study. As pointed out by Saunders et al. (2012), the researcher is given the freedom to make relevant interpretations in a meaningful manner regarding the research elements in order to assume that the research is reflective of realistic social and human-made constructions, languages, collective consciousness, and shared values.

Given the nature of this research, the interpretivist research philosophy was the most suitable, as concrete interpretations can be made based on the findings from the interviews and focus group discussions, aligning the results and analyzed data with the theories and concepts presented in this study.

Research Approach

This study followed the approach of inductive research. According to Saunders et al. (2012), inductive research draws reference from generalization to particularization. In this research,

the generalization was the general theories and concepts for character development. While the particularization was the new recommendations made to strengthen the concept of character development for amateur actors in this study.

Research Strategy

As brought out by (Punch & Punch, 2005), the main focus of qualitative research is to arrive at findings and conclusions that are predominantly detailed and insightful with the intention of attempting to gain a solid understanding of human experiences, behaviors, thoughts, and their intentions and reasons for them. Thus, the research strategy that was employed in this study was a qualitative study that utilized descriptive statistical summaries. Given the nature of this study, which is predominantly based on a practical subject as drama, the qualitative approach will be best suited as the subject matter of character development needs to be analyzed in detail to propose new approaches that will enable actors to personalize their character development approaches with a solid theoretical and conceptual background. Hence, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were utilized in this study.

Sampling

The non-probability sampling method was utilized to select respondents for the sample size. According to Palmer and Bolderston (2006), non-probability sampling is the most common approach in qualitative studies. Under non-probability sampling, the convenience sampling method was utilized, where respondents were selected based on their knowledge, experience, and availability for the study. The sample size rested at $N = 30$, comprising 30 amateur actors of English theatre in Sri Lanka, mostly from the area of Colombo.

Results and Discussions

The following is a discussion on the results from the semi-structured interviews ($N = 30$) and focus group discussion ($N = 1$). Please note that only the majority and minority results have been presented in this discussion.

Table 1: Personal Definition of Character Development

Responses	Percentage
Character development in acting is a gradual process of becoming another character in a play	40%

Character development in acting is a way of discovering different sides of an actor that can facilitate multiple roles in drama	15%
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When analysing the above interview findings, it is evident that these definitions are reflective of the personal views, opinions and knowledge Sri Lankan stage actors, directors, teachers and students of acting currently possess and have possessed for a considerable amount of time in Sri Lanka, making this research even more relevant and necessary in expanding the knowledge, awareness and experience of Sri Lankan theatre artists in this regard.

Table 2: Internal Characterization

Responses	Percentage
Internal characterization in acting is the process of understanding the character's feelings and thoughts	45%
Internal characterization determines the success of an actor's role	25%

It is evident when examining and analyzing the above responses of the respondents that the majority possess a basic and a surface-level understanding of the concept of internal characterization, but lack practical application and knowledge of how an actor can become another character within a play. Hence, the necessity of this research is further enhanced as it provides Sri Lankan actors, directors, teachers, and students of acting a comprehensive understanding based on theoretical and conceptual frameworks that will enable them to curate their own unique personal approaches to character development in the world of drama and theatre.

Table 3: External Characterization

Responses	Percentage
External characterization in acting is the outer remaking of an actor to become another character through costumes, makeup and props	60%

External characterization helps the audience to recognize the respective character on stage. Hence, it is mostly beneficial for the audience	15%
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When examining and analyzing the above responses, it is evident that the area of external characterization has not been comprehensively understood and applied by a majority of Sri Lankans in the world of drama and theatre. Therefore, this research will be of vital importance in equipping the Sri Lankan theatre world with appropriate knowledge and understanding of this concept to further enhance the spontaneity and overall quality of drama and theatre in the country.

Table 4: Interpersonal Characterization

Responses	Percentage
Have no idea about this concept of interpersonal characterization	80%
Interpersonal characterization is part of the overall characterization of the actor as he/she interacts with other characters in the play	20%

In light of the above findings and analysis, it is evident that this study is of vital importance in terms of introducing and navigating this novel concept of interpersonal characterization to Sri Lankan actors, directors, teachers, and students of acting to add a depth of understanding, spontaneity, and meaning to their existing theatre performances.

Table 5: Approaches to Character Development

Responses	Percentage
Doing research on the background of the play and character, reading through the script carefully, identifying the details and role of the respective character, and trying to emulate that in the best way possible	45%
After research and discussion on the play with the director and the rest of the cast, taking steps to be mentally,	15%

emotionally, and physically ready for the role. Observing similar characters and situations will also help in this process at times	
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When analyzing the above responses, it is evident that they bring out the potential of disseminating the knowledge and findings of this study, as some Sri Lankan actors, directors, teachers, and students already have some knowledge and reference to developing personalized approaches in character development and require further guidance, support, training, and knowledge in this regard.

Table 6: The Challenges Encountered During Character Development

Responses	Percentage
It is challenging to engage in character development when the character is far removed from the experience and personality of the respective actor	50%
It is a daunting task to work on accents and dialects that are required for the performance of some characters. Especially, performing Shakespearean pieces with blank verse is a challenge	15%

The responses of the majority bring to light the awareness that Sri Lankans currently possess in the world of drama and theatre, but require practical approaches, specifically techniques steeped in concrete theory, to assist them with this process of character development as presented in the minority response.

Table 7 : Handling Challenges in Character Development

Responses	Percentage
Engaging in contextual research, personal research on the character and practice is utilized in facing challenges pertaining to character development	55%

Engaging in a quiet time in order to fully submerge oneself in the character helps overcome challenges therein	15%
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Table 8 : Handling Challenges in Character Development

Responses	Percentage
Engaging in contextual research, personal research on the character and practice is utilized in facing challenges pertaining to character development	55%
Engaging in a quiet time in order to fully submerge oneself in the character helps overcome challenges therein	15%

While this is the basic step in character development when analysing the response of the majority, many other layers need to be applied in this regard, and this response lacks that depth, making this research essential for Sri Lankans in drama and theatre.

Table 9: Current Support for Sri Lankan Amateur English Theatre Actors

Responses	Percentage
There isn't much support provided in this regard in Sri Lanka at present	65%
There is limited access to library books, funding, training partnerships, and collaborations in Sri Lankan English theatre	35%

The responses as a whole echo the overall lack of resources and professional help available for Sri Lankan actors and students of acting, which is quite evident in this regard, further deepening the need for this study.

Current approaches to character development in acting do not provide any guidance for the personalization of this research assumption, tested to be positive. Upon careful examination and analysis of the field data in alignment with the theories and concepts outlined, it is evident that no proper and concrete support, training, and materials are made available for Sri Lankan amateur actors of the English theatre to utilize in character development for stage acting.

Conclusion

This study was built on five research objectives. The first research objective was achieved when it was brought out that character development in acting is of vital importance in drama and theatre and must be based upon sound theoretical and conceptual understanding and knowledge (Harrop, 1985). Thereby confirming the relevance and need for this study.

The second research objective was approached both theoretically and practically. Accordingly, a basic and surface-level knowledge and approaches on the area of character development were displayed by the respondents, with very limited reference made to solid theoretical and conceptual frameworks on character development. This further affirms the necessity of this research as appropriate theoretical and conceptual solutions in this regard were presented, paving the way for the development and application of personalized approaches in character development (Berlianov, 2024).

This third research objective was met when respondents brought out the challenges they faced in terms of the lack of theoretical and conceptual knowledge, lack of supportive materials, professionals, training, networking, and collaboration with other relevant professional and academic institutions locally and internationally (Keñesbaevna, 2023).

The fourth research objective was met when responses showed that, in spite of having some considerable theoretical knowledge on character development, amateur actors still needed a clear and personalized approach in terms of engaging in character development (Therese et al., 2002).

The fifth research objective was met when recommendations were made to develop a reading database or mini-library for amateur English theatre artists to have easy access to the relevant academic and professional resources, organize frequent workshops, training and drama camps with professionally experienced and/or academically qualified theatre professionals, develop more collaboration opportunities with local and international institutions, encouraging creating support groups within the Sri Lankan theatre community for artists and to organize character development competitions to encourage and inspire Sri Lankan English theatre artists to develop creative approaches for personalized character development (Kewalramani & Kumar, 2024).

Upon the conclusion of this study, the researcher identified two areas for further research. The first area for further research is in terms of researching appropriate teaching methods that can

be incorporated when teaching character development to students of drama, ranging from very young students to senior and more mature students. This research will benefit both Sri Lankan teachers of drama and the students under their tutelage. The second area that can be further researched is in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the integration of theories and training provided for Sri Lankan theatre artists, after the above recommendations have been successfully implemented.

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