From Free Education to Utilitarianism; Mapping the Pedagogical Struggles of the Unheard in the Era of COVID-19

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Abstract – The free education policy of Sri Lanka introduced in 1943 assures all citizens of Sri Lanka of the right to education from the primary school to the undergraduate degree levels. However, with the mandatory shift to an asynchronous education system due to COVID-19, the focus has moved from the learning rights of the individual to the mere continuation of education for the 'greater good', making it a utilitarian decision. This 'progressive' approach, has further marginalized the economically disadvantaged students who have become the collateral damage of education during COVID-19. As discussed by Kandiah and Parakrama, English teaching and learning in Sri Lanka systematically discriminates a considerable number of students socially, politically, and linguistically. These realities combined with the online education system have further discriminated/ distanced students from learning the English language. As ESL (English as a Second Language) instructors we aim to focus on this group of students who have been swept under the rug by the current educational practice(s). The study takes a dual approach of autoethnography and informal discussions with 80 undergraduates from faculties of Allied Health Sciences and Arts of the University of Peradeniya. Our findings show that economically marginalized students who already find learning English challenging, are further challenged on virtual platforms, and how this severity has heightened through technical and financial difficulties in accessing online education. Therefore, this study attempts to unveil the pedagogical struggles of these students and calls for the need for a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable alternative.

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