

Strategies for Negotiating “Error” in the Online ESL Classroom: A Study Based on a Cohort of First-Year Undergraduate Students of the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

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Abstract - Since April 2020, Sri Lankan state universities have resorted to the online platform as a means of continuing their function during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a move, done almost overnight, exposed the already existent inconsistencies within the education system and this is evident even more prominently in ELT practice, given the extra-linguistic baggage that English already carries. In such a context, this action research explores how a group of 32 first year undergraduates whose English competency ranges in mid basic level, engages in the learning/teaching process. The primary focus is on how various online strategies are adopted by the author (teacher/researcher) and the students to negotiate “error” and “error correction” in ESL writing. The notion of “error” is a perennial point of contention in ELT research and practice, yet a lived reality in language teaching/learning. This study demonstrates how online resources such as the Whiteboard and chat features on Zoom were used to engage in collective “error correction” of the writing produced by students. The observational data of student participation, complemented by student performance at focused in-class writing activities and responses to semi-structured interviews with the students, show that these strategies have been successful in taking the sting out of “error” correction through fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for their language production. Furthermore, the additional use of the WhatsApp group chat feature enables ongoing learning beyond the classroom session, where the students engage in peer evaluation as well, showing how they negotiate these unprecedented circumstances to improve language learning both individually and collectively.

Keywords: “Error” correction, online classroom, collective