

“I Know I’m Crying, I don’t Know what to do, but I want to Teach”: Teaching ESL to Undergraduate Students with Special Needs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract –This study examines how an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at the University of Peradeniya took efforts to ensure that her students with special needs are not left out as her university moved to mandatory online teaching in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Special needs students are often marginalized in the educational sphere and in the online context they are further marginalized. The study was conducted over one academic year (July, 2020 - March 2021). Methodologically, it occupies the intersections of descriptive case study and autoethnography. This hybridized methodological approach created space for the narrative voice of the ESL-teacher-participant to emerge through the paper while enabling the data to be analysed from different points of view. Data generated include the ESL teacher’s reflective notes, artifacts (teaching materials, student work, etc.), “classroom” observations, experiences shared by the students with the teacher and a focus group discussion among the ESL-teacher-participant and the other three co-authors. In our data analysis, we identified multiple challenges faced by the ESL teacher and her students, including limitations of currently available modalities in online teaching, creation of teaching materials without taking students with special needs into account, and the lack of teacher training. The data also threw light on the ESL teacher’s resilience and emotional labour of teaching. This study is significant because it offers insights into ways in which ESL teachers could better facilitate their students with special needs and offers implications for administrators (the de facto policymakers) to make evidence-informed inclusive policies.

Keywords: ESL, Students with Special Needs, Online Teaching