Reading the Online Classroom as a Space Which Disables as well as Enables the Weak(er) ESL Student

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Abstract – Preference for Online Teaching surged during the COVID- 19 global pandemic despite having been available as a method of teaching/ learning for many years. For more than a year now, many higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka have been using online platforms for teaching/ learning purposes. Since ESL teaching methods are different from those used in a non- ESL classroom, ESL teachers and students had to adapt to and improvise on such online platforms. However, the impact of this was more on the ESL student whose English competence level(s) was low. The online platform became a space with which the student negotiated, where they navigated themselves through and to which they adjusted. The pandemic overwhelmed the voice, if there were any, that earlier spoke about the discrimination against the linguistically and technologically challenged student on these new normal platforms. The ESL student, therefore, negotiates with this uncharted space by several means such as using online translation software, internet-based plagiarism, switching off audio and video, and using the "Chat" option etc. Data gathered during observations of online ESL classrooms with low competence level students were used in the study. Data from informal interviews with 10 ESL students and 8 ESL teachers were also used. The theoretical framework was shaped by the works of Arjuna Parakrama, Suresh Canagarajah and Manique Gunasekare. The study concluded that despite its *disabling* nature, the ESL student has found ways to make the online classroom an *enabling* space which then appears safer than the traditional ESL classroom.

Keywords: Online space, Enabling and disabling, ESL student.

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