Issues Encountered by ESL Instructors When Striving to Provide an Inclusive Learning Environment for Their Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ESL instructors aim to provide an inclusive learning environment for their students, to help them succeed academically, boost their confidence, equip them with the necessary skills to face the diverse world and inspire them to learn the language beyond the classroom. This research employed a qualitative method to examine the issues they encountered when striving to provide an inclusive learning environment to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Arts, at the University of Peradeniya, following its post-pandemic reopening. Prior to the university's closure, the first-year undergraduates were grouped according to their competency using a placement test, with many students placed at the basic competency level. Hence purposive sampling was employed, selecting 15 ESL instructors who taught students in the basic competency level for this study. Interviews were conducted with these 15 ESL instructors and content analysis was employed to analyze these qualitative data. According to the results of the study, technological challenges such as students lacking the necessary devices for online learning, poor internet connectivity, low student engagement due to lack of face-to-face interactions, distractions at home, lack of individual attention, issues in assessment and evaluation such as adapting assessments to suit the online format, ensuring authenticity, and providing timely feedback to students were revealed as the issues encountered by ESL instructors when striving to provide an inclusive learning environment to their students. While online teaching/learning enabled students to continue their education during the pandemic, it was found to be less than ideal in the Sri Lankan context. Although the pandemic has currently subsided, there is no guarantee against future disruptions. Therefore, this research provides valuable insights for policymakers and educational professionals to develop strategies that ensure an inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of the circumstances in the country.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, ESL Instructors, Inclusive Learning Environment, Issues