Teaching Writing in the Virtual Classroom: Challenges and the Way Forward

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Abstract : The sudden transition from onsite to online teaching/learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic called for a need to incorporate feasible as well as effective methods of online teaching in most developing countries like Sri Lanka. The English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom faces specific challenges in this adaptation, and teaching writing can be identified as the most challenging task compared to teaching the other three skills. This study was therefore carried out to explore the challenges of teaching writing online and to provide effective means of overcoming them while taking into consideration the attitudes of students and teachers with regard to learning/teaching English writing via online platforms. A survey questionnaire was distributed (electronically) among 60 students from the University of Colombo, the University of Kelaniya, and The Open University in order to find out the challenges faced by students, while in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 lecturers from the mentioned universities. The findings reveal that the inability to observe students' writing and to receive real-time feedback discourage students from engaging in writing activities when taught online. It was also discovered that both students and teachers increasingly prefer Google Slides over other platforms such as Padlet, Linoit, and Jam Board as it boosts learner autonomy and student-teacher interaction, which in turn allows real-time formative feedback, observation of student work, and assessment. Accordingly, it can be recommended that teaching writing online can be better facilitated by using interactive platforms such as Google Slides, for it promotes active learning and student engagement in the ESL class.
Keywords : ESL, teaching writing, online teaching, active learning, student engagement