

# **The Cultural Influence on the Interaction between Student and Tutor in Online Tutorial: A Case of Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the influence of culture in the interaction process between student and tutor in online tutorial in Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. Adopting distance education system, which originally from western culture of learning which requires student's autonomy and capability of self-regulated in learning, can be a problem when the system is adopted to the Indonesia society who holds teacher-dependent of learning and culture which basically opposites to the western culture. To large extent it is confirmed that in the case of interaction between student and instructor, the Indonesian culture of learning become a barrier in the activity. To some points, however, being forced to study in distance learning system can make students adjust themselves to the system and improves their learning habit.

## **Introduction**

Universitas Terbuka (UT) and the 45<sup>th</sup> state university in Indonesia, is the only one that uses distance learning as its sole mode of delivery and instruction. The country's "Open University" is particularly has been assigned the mission to meet the educational needs of those least served by the existing conventional educational service. The government's decision to establish Universitas Terbuka was in line with the national educational development strategy presented in the Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (*Rencana Pembangunan Lima Tahun IV or Repelita IV*), 1984-1989. The main objective targeted by the development of a national distance education institution was to increase the absorptive capacity of the higher education system in order to help achieve the goals of the first *Repelita IV* (USAID, 1986). Since the Indonesian independence, very few numbers of people graduated from higher education. UNESCO/ICDE (1990) noted that in 1978 the participation rate of the 18-24 age group people was only 2.5%. In 1984, only 15% of 483.000 senior high school graduates admitted to conventional universities. Providing mass access to universities was then the only choice.

Establishing an "open university" was therefore considered as a more practical and economical way to provide access to large number of students in a relatively short period of time. In more specific, the goals of establishing Universitas Terbuka in September 1984 were to increase the capacity of higher education, to upgrade the qualifications of primary and secondary school teachers, and to provide particular training areas needed to support the development of economic and cultural of the country (Belawati, 1995).

With the sense of 'emergency' of having the open university for the urgent need of establishing large capacity of higher education, the Indonesian Government only gave a little time to the Preparation Committee to create the design (Setijadi, 1988; USAID, 1986). The main task of the Committee was to plan and design all teaching and learning activities through a distance learning system. The core system of the university design was adopted from the existing models of open universities, particularly from the United Kingdom Open University. The Committee designed the simplest system of open and distance education that could be supported with the existing means and devices. The main course material was printed based written by well-known experts or professors at existing reputable public and private conventional universities in Indonesia. The first generation of course material was added by audio-cassette materials to enhance and highlight the important parts of the course content and offers some variety in the delivery mode (Setijadi, 1988).

During these early years of operation, Universitas Terbuka was struggling to run the teaching and learning activities to the students with the new system. Course delivery depended almost exclusively on printed materials and the complementary attachments. The university offered almost no official student learning support except encouragement for students to form study groups with peers living in their area (Setijadi, 1988). More recently, UT has begun to offer other kinds of supports in forms of tutorials to help students in their learning. These include face-to-face tutorials, tutorials by radio or television, and online tutorials. Each has evolved over time to adjust to the situation and the nature of the association with other parties involved in the provision of the learning service – and in order to increase the quality and effectiveness of the support.

Among other kinds of tutorials, currently face-to-face and online tutorial have been the most important student learning services. Face-to-face tutorial is actually wanted by most students because this kind of tutorial has similarity with the conventional system of learning in the classroom. Although the learning method of face-to-face tutorial is not exactly the same as classroom learning system in regular, the learning support gives students a chance to meet tutors and their peers in person. This tutorial, however, cannot be afforded by all students since they not only have to pay some amount of money but also have to have time to travel to the tutorial locations in tight schedule. The second kind of support, online tutorial, may be the other main support that can be accessed by most students. This non-compulsory tutorial is offered in all courses and free of charge to all students who take its course and have access to Internet network. Although many students have no access to internet and cannot join the learning support, this tutorial has the biggest participants in total numbers. In 2013 the number participants has reached more than 122 thousands. However, this number does not represent the actual number of individual students who participate in online tutorials, since students commonly enroll in more than one courses (Zubaidah, 2013).

In the early of establishment of Universitas Terbuka, besides giving hopes and encouragement to increase of student number who enters the higher education, the university with distance education system had also raised some concerns and criticisms. The critiques were particularly regarding the appropriateness of the distance education system with the learning culture in Indonesia. One criticism was from Dunbar (1991) who truly concerned that Indonesian students would be able to adjust their learning behavior to distance learning system imported from western which originally held different culture. Indonesian students were doubtfully

capable to adjust drastically to autonomous learning culture which was required in distance learning system. Further Dunbar elaborated that Indonesian students used to live in a strong heteronomous Asian culture imposed by formal social hierarchies, compliance to an authority figure and seeking approval, sense of collective identification and refuse individualism, adhering social harmony and avoiding confrontation. Such heteronomous factors were likely to oppose original distance learning culture which referred to teacher-independent and self regulation learning behaviors.

Dunbar criticism on the learning cultural difference between western and Asian may refer to the whole learning process in the implementation of distance education system in Indonesia. This paper, however, aims specifically to examine the influence of culture on the pattern of interaction between students and tutor in online tutorial for distance learning bachelor degree program at Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia.

### **Online tutorial**

In its distance learning courses, the Universitas Terbuka is confronted with a major problem: how to increase interactivity and effective support for students who are not used to exercising full learner "autonomy". The use of internet for distance learning support appears to offer one solution to this problem. Since the year 2000, the growing of internet users in Indonesia has been remarkable. March 31, 2012, ranking Indonesia 8<sup>th</sup> in number of active users among all countries in the world and making it one of the fastest growing in that regard, with the number of base users increasing at 32% a year since the turn of the millennium (<http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/indonesia-expects-nationwide-internet-coverage-by-2013/510557>). The increasing number of internet users thus can be seen as an opportunity for Universitas Terbuka to reach their students through the network.

In 1999 UT initiated an electronic tutorial for students who had access to internet. From time to time, year to year the online tutorial have been changed and enhanced in order to provide the best learning experience to all students in their study. The number of courses offered this learning support was initially only a few. The offer increases from time to time in accordance with the improvement of the tutorial system. Finally, in the beginning of 2014 Universitas Terbuka decided to offer this online tutorial for each course. Student who enrolls a number of courses free to join to the online tutorial related to the courses. The participation, however, is not compulsory and it is up to the student to choose which online tutorial of courses he or she wants to participate.

The expand development of information and communication network in the country has given more chance students to participate in the online tutorial. The number of student participants is growing dramatically. Currently, Universitas Terbuka has offered more than 900 courses in various levels of programs, and recruited about 9000 tutors to manage the tutorials (Universitas Terbuka, 2009).

The tutorials could be found in UT's web site ([www.ut.ac.id](http://www.ut.ac.id)), where students could access the preferred course they wanted to join. Each course tutorial was facilitated by a tutor or a team of tutors. The tutors were requested to prepare and provide at least eight examples of initiation materials to trigger discussion. Nevertheless, the online tutorials were open throughout

the semester so that students could post questions, comments and responses to the questions posed by tutors and fellow students at any time. In order to ensure quick turnaround, tutors were requested to check their respective tutorial accounts every day and they were supposed to respond to all posted questions promptly. The initiation materials were designed (by tutors) to include resources on the elaboration of concepts, enrichment activities, summaries of certain sections of the course materials and questions to provoke reflection. Students were informed that their participation and the scores on assignments given in the online tutorials could contribute as much as 30% to their final course grade. It was expected that students would be motivated to participate in the online tutorials and that their participation would enhance their learning. In general characteristic of online tutorial in Universitas Terbuka can be seen in the Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Leading characteristics of current UT online tutorial program

<b>ONLINE TUTORIAL</b>			
<b>General Criteria</b>	<b>Student Participant</b>	<b>Tutor</b>	<b>Grading</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Free of charge</li> <li>▪ Facilitated by a tutor or team of tutors</li> <li>▪ One group consists of 1-300 students</li> <li>▪ Eight weeks within the semester</li> <li>▪ Eight weekly discussions and three assignments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Available to the students registered in the related course</li> <li>▪ Registered student who have activated their email automatically registered to the tutorial</li> <li>▪ Supported by online forum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Academic staff from the relevant course in the program of study</li> <li>▪ Have passed online tutor training related to e-tutoring and the content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Final score of tutorial taken from the participation and assignment</li> <li>▪ Online tutorial score can contribute 30% of course grade/score</li> </ul>

Source: Zubaidah, 2013

The most important goal of online tutorial, besides to help the student learning process, is to provide opportunity for the students to interact particularly with the instructor/tutor. In the tutorial, generally students are required to be active in eight weekly discussions. Usually the tutor will provide an initiation and a topic to be discussed but the students can post any other question or topic when they have difficulties on understanding the course materials. When the students have other inquiries that are not quite related to the course material, they can post questions to an online forum and get response from relevant person or university authority.

Online tutorial also provide limited information about each student participates in the tutorial, such as email address and the city where the student lives. By this information the students can interact or even meet to each other if they want it. Thus the students have a chance to create a study group or other activities that can help their study.

In order to be successful in the online tutorial thus requires the students to be active in all activities. In the discussions, the students entail to response discussion question by posting

opinion or reply to other students' and tutor's opinion. Sometimes they need to oppose the opinion from the tutor and the other students too. To do such thing, the students need to overcome cultural barrier in communicating with the tutor who are usually consider as the person who has more knowledge in the class.

### **Asian and Indonesian student learning culture**

Most literature on distance education indicates that a distance education system can ensure quality and promote learning achievement as well as a conventional one. However, similar to Dunbar (1991) concerns about inappropriateness of western and eastern (Asian) cultures in applying distance education model to Asian (Indonesian) learning culture, Yang (2005) points out both the concept of distance education and the literature researching it come from western society and are based on surveys and data conducted on western populations and cultures. By comparing the cultures of distance education origin and Asian cultures, it is skeptical that the distance educational research results in western culture and environment will be suitable for Asian educational society (Yang, 2005).

Chalmers and Volet (1997) contest the common perceptions of students from Southeast Asia as largely surface learners and passive participants who typically lack the skills of analysis and critical thinking required for independent study. A number of other studies also confirm the teacher-centered learning style preference of Asian students. Teachers represent authority, power, and source of knowledge (Yang, 2005; Nguyen, 2011). Asian students are seen as stereotypically quiet, compliant and good at following direction – pupils who moreover expect their teachers to know everything (Wong, 2004; Yang, 2005).

In the case of Indonesian students, Dardjowidjojo (2001) argues that the concept of learner autonomy is not well adapted to implementation in an Indonesian culture setting, in particular example being Javanese culture. The Javanese are the biggest ethnic group in Indonesia and the one with the most cultural and social influence. Dardjowidjojo argues that the interrelation among members of Javanese society is very much determined by hierarchical social structures: rank, social status and age in particular. Similar patterns in other Asian societies mirror this acute consciousness of “who is older and who is younger, who has a higher level of education, who has a lower level, who is in a higher institutional or economic position and who is the lower, or who is teacher and who is student” (Schollon & Schollon, 1995, p.81). This hierarchical relationship determines inequality and authority among the social structure in the society. According to Dardjowidjojo (2001), in Javanese society, people with lower status (students, children, or common people) are expected to obey (*manut*) and follow (*miturut*) the elders (teacher, parent, or head of village). Values common to most Asian cultures dictate that, in educational settings, students are expected to be obedient and follow the teacher's direction without question.

Indonesian society also places high value on harmony and tolerance. These cultural values have historically helped to maintain the unity of a society that consists of around 300 different ethnic groups. In Javanese culture there is, for example, an element of cultural wisdom that focuses on *ewuh* (the experience of being uncomfortable) and *pekewuh* (the experience of feeling uneasy) and teaches its members to avoid confrontation in social communication whenever they come to disagreement (Dardjowidjojo 2001). This cultural norm relates to the principle of

collectivism and harmony within society and the precept that the younger, the commoner and the student have to respect the older person, the leader and the teacher. These norms make people of lower status feel *pekewuh* whenever they disagree with the elders or those are considered to occupy higher status. Such values also have a strong effect on the educational environment. The behavior of a student who contradicts or argues with his or her teachers can be seen as unethical and disrespectful. It is natural therefore for Indonesian students to expect and follow "teacher-driven" styles in school and in their learning activities; they receive knowledge from the teacher without question (Wong, 2004; Yang, 2005). At the same time, this learning culture can create serious learning problems when students have to study in a distance education system that requires high degree of student autonomy.

Given these cultural realities, there has been understandable concern about how UT manages the learning process of its students. The concern focuses particularly on the fact that Indonesian society is characterized by heteronomy and social hierarchies that influence the teaching and learning system in education as mentioned by Dunbar (1991). Dunbar was skeptical about how Indonesian students, who were used to conventional face-to-face instruction and teacher-centered learning styles, would succeed in their abrupt transfer to a distance learning system that required independent learning skills. Such skeptic opinion may be used to examine the students' performance in the interaction with their tutors/instructors in online tutorial activities in Universitas Terbuka.

### **Discussion and interaction in online tutorial**

There is an understanding that one of the objectives of online tutorial is to give a chance for students to interact with the instructor. In the provided guide of the tutorial, it is stated that the online tutorial is an alternative tutorial to give a chance for students who have access to the internet to have the experience of a classroom situation via the internet. By utilizing internet technology to support student learning, Universitas Terbuka also gives a chance for the students to communicate with their instructor.

In a research conducted by Zubaidah (2013) in examining the implementation of online tutorial in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, it was identified that in the process of discussion tutor usually provided initiation and sometimes also additional material to help students understand the weekly topic taken from printed course material. These material should be read by the students in order to be able participate in the discussion. The instructor then also posted a question related to the topic of the week to be discussed by the students by posting an opinion or response. In the discussion, the tutor usually did not give individual feedback to the student posts, but remark or highlight at the end of the discussion. Since the social science is not necessary to have exact answer to every problem, the tutor expected the students to exercise of giving opinion and debating the topic.

In an in-depth interview with the students about their opinion on the discussion strategy, some students gave similar opinions that they needed the tutor "to respond students' posts individually... to let me know that I gave a right argument..." Other students responded that they "need exact answer from the tutor". These results of the interview show that the students think the tutor must have more knowledge and always has exact answer for every question related to

the content of the course. The tutor is a source of knowledge in their learning and they will take the tutor opinion as the right understanding.

When they were asked about the possibility of opposing tutor opinion in the discussion, the students said that the tutor answered should be the right one. Besides opposing tutor opinion is not so polite because he/she acted like smarter than the tutor. One student, however, said that he would say the opinion what he thought was right although it opposed the tutor opinion. He said that in online discussion made him easier to do that because he was not directly having discussion with the tutor. He felt that he did not know the tutor personally and that made him easier to present his opposing opinion.

From the last student answer about opposing opinion with the tutor is like different from the eastern cultural pattern of learning. This does not accurately confirm the Asian cultural influence to the student attitude toward his teacher/tutor, however, it is possibly due to the indirect connection between student and his teacher. The student therefore does not feel cultural power of his teacher over him.

In the interview with a tutor, it was asked to a tutor why in the discussion sessions with the students, the tutor did not give individual response to the student post? The tutor said that it was designed not to give response to every post. Besides giving individual response was impossible due to the large number of student posts, it was also because the tutor wanted students did exercise discussing a topic. Even the tutor suggested not giving so many responses while the student having discussion because interrupting student discussion would likely stop the discussion. The tutor believed that interrupting post from tutor would be considered by the students as the right answer or argument to the question of discussion. The students would think that opinion from the tutor should be the right one because the tutor knew better about the course content. Again this opinion confirms that eastern cultural of learning control the learning process by assuming that the opinion from the teacher, the elder, must be right and obeyed.

One student, however, said that study in distance learning system improved her learning behavior. She mentioned that when she studied in face-to-face classroom learning environment she was practically passive. She only needed to come to the classroom and listening to the instructor lectures. But when she studied in distance learning system she did her study more actively and learning harder because she felt that she only relied on herself and her activeness in learning. These changed her study habit. She became more active to contact her peers study to make sure that she did her assignments and tasks in the right time. She actively searched additional related material to the topic she studied when she felt not enough only to read the given printed material from university. This showed that distance learning system can also change the learning habit of the student to become more active and adjusting to the distance learning culture.

## **Conclusion**

From the case of online tutorial in Universitas Terbuka to large extent it is confirmed that distance learning system originally from western culture cannot be applied without some adjustments in order to obtain the learning objectives. On the other hand, the implementation of

distance learning system also encourage the students to adjust themselves to the new system in order to find the best method for their learning process.

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