

A study on online interaction between tutor and students in a Public Speaking course at Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

Sri Sedyaningsih & Aminudin Zuhairi
Universitas Terbuka
Jalan Cabe Raya, Pamulang, Tangerang 15418, Indonesia
dianb@mail.ut.ac.id, aminz@mail.ut.ac.id
Telephone: +62 21 7490941, extension 1906 and 1214
Fax. +62 21 7434391

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Abstract

Learning support is essential to facilitate students in an online learning environment. At Universitas Terbuka (UT), learning support services are provided in various means, using the face-to-face as well as distance and online modes. Online tutorial is one of the learning support services provided by UT, with the aim of providing opportunities to students to have better understanding of the printed learning materials. Because of its online character, online tutorial has the advantage of allowing for more flexible access to learning through asynchronous means of interaction and communication between tutor and students and peer online tutorials among students themselves in a virtual learning environment. The physical absence of tutor in an online learning environment makes interaction or dialogue become impersonal and pragmatic, and online interactions focus on the learning topics under discussion. The course Public Speaking is intended to develop the students' capability to express and communicate ideas with the public effectively. The course is equipped with printed and non-printed learning materials to help students in their independent learning activities. Students learn concepts on public speaking from the printed materials and are exposed with examples of public speaking through non-printed or CD-ROM materials. The online tutorials are designed to enhance students' learning of public speaking concepts through online interactions. This study attempts to look at how the interaction and communication between tutors and students in online learning environment without interpersonal communication aspects such as inclusion, affection and control. A descriptive study has been conducted involving content analysis of online tutorial activities during the semester 2010-1. Findings of this study have revealed that there seems to be lack of politeness, weak communication etiquette, and the need for online tutors to enhance students' motivation to learn in an online learning environment.

Introduction

Online tutorial is one form of support services to distance students provided by Universitas Terbuka (UT), Indonesia. Online tutorial services are provided each semester as much as eight times for each course. The main activity of the online tutorial consists of eight initiations, three assignments in the 3rd, 5th, and 7th initiations, and online discussion forum. Online tutorial is not mandatory, however students participation in online tutorial controbutes

30% to the final semester grade. Other forms of learning support services for UT distance students, apart from the printed learning materials, include face-to-face tutorials, non-printed learning materials, and interactive video conferencing. This paper specifically addresses online tutorials, particularly in terms of online interaction between tutor and students taking the course Public Speaking.

The course Public Speaking is offered by the UT's Department of Communication, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. During the semester 2009.2, 234 students registered for the course, and 134 students (61%) of them signed up for online tutorial of the Public Speaking course. This online tutorial registration shows that not all students feel that they need learning support via online tutorial services. Some students who do not participate in online tutorial may think that they can learn independently on their own because the learning materials are clear enough for them to understand and they see little relevance of online tutorial to the semester examination and the insignificant role of tutors.

The other condition which has emerged during tutorial online is the tendency of students in paying less attention to ethics in online communication. The absence of physical context that accompanies every online interaction through the computer causes the loss or lack of non-verbal signs. Interactions that occur without significant non-verbal signs provide more flexibility to interact with each participant as a source only. This means that participants may not place themselves as students, and thus they may highly take interaction as a source. In other words, interaction takes place focusing only on the substance of the course.

Research questions

Such condition above raises a problem concerning the form of interaction that occurs through online tutorial, that is, perceived loss of cultural values normally occurring in the communication process. Then a further problem is the decreasing roles of tutors in the learning process and the absence of control elements, affection and inclusion in any process of interaction. Thus interpersonal online interactions is also referred to as mass media interpersonal.

Based on the existing problems, the authors attempt to address questions on online interaction process between tutor and distance students in Public Speaking course during the semester of 2009.2 as follows.

1. Does online interaction lose the meaning derived from cultural values of tutor and students?
2. Does online interaction omit the meaning derived from the role of tutor and students?
3. Does online interaction lose the essence of interpersonal meaning such as inclusion, affection and control?

Framework

There are some theoretical backgrounds that show how tutor and students interact online. Communication happens through the computer are often referred to as computer mediated communication (CMC), which is in nature interpersonal mass media. Such form of interaction can be on one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many bases, and can take place in

interpersonal as well as mass communication. The problem of meaning in a message or information is an important part in this discussion. Therefore, the construction process of meaning becomes the basis of discussion of this paper, addressing the theory of interpersonal communication as well as advantages and disadvantages of CMC.

Meaning

The most critical feature in distinguishing the face-to-face communication and CMC is the absence of signs of social or social context cues, which include the physical environment as a social situation where the status of a natural person who communicates is in touch with the situation (Sproul & Kiesler, 1986). The absence of signs of non-verbal communication also means a lack of social context which establishes homogeneity of the participants. Lack of non-verbal signs in the cues filtered out approach is articulated in several assumptions. First, communication via technology media limits the signs of communication that exist in the face-to-face mode. Second, different media also have different limitation of signs. And third, the presence of media technology changes the intrapersonal and interpersonal variables for the face-to-face mode of communication. This approach implies that the structure of the media changes the nature and interpretation of a message (Culnan & Markus in Walther,1992).

Meaning is formed not by itself. There are denotative and connotative meanings. Denotative meaning is interpreted based on the meanings of words themselves, while connotative meaning is one that is constructed from the circumstances and conditions, or in this case the meaning of meaning within a context. According to Schutz (in Hufford,1995), the relationship between context and meaning is the linkage of the world and context into a narrative that creates meaning. The relationship between text and context is the relationship between part and whole that exists. Theory of context sees context as a composition of information that limits the conversation of individual or localises the expression of individuals. The focus of the context is actually a real condition, as Glanzber (2008) formulates it as follows:

$$\text{Sentence} + \text{context} = \text{truth condition}$$

With this formulations, it can be illustrated that if a person interacts with others and produces a satisfaction for both parties, the relationship between the sentence and the context will result in satisfaction in interacting. This focuses on the satisfaction by how they say, why do they say, and how they relate with each other. People speak not only of what she or he knows or her or his knowledge but also when they participate, including when they communicate in certain situations. Actually people subjectively represent the social situation where they are verbally, whether at home, at school, while reading books, participating in meetings or other events, coupled with the social situation as a limitation in the discourse as the context model or context (Van Dijk, 1999).

This condition does not happen in distance learning, because there is no linkage between the context and the sentence, which normally occurs only in terms of convergence between the sentence. Meaning and action are always present in a context or frame of reference of interpretation and action. One context is always attached to the context of the other so that each context is part of the broader context of the other. Communication situations are confronted by two things. First, we give meaning to fit the situation, behaviour and messages from others. And second, we decide how to respond through action in the situation. Meaning

and action are two things that affect each other through the media context. Context is a reference that restricts the meaning and action. Context will provide the framework for meaning and action, the context of inter-relatedness, so one context is part of other broader contexts. Based on the level of a context for students every action will be interpreted based on the relationships that occur in the interaction which is also influenced by the situations and conditions where the communication occurs.

Hall (1976) also questioned the context that does not appear in the message but in some cases more important than the message itself, because the proportion occupied by the context of the message given will vary depending on how people use context to understand a message. The whole idea of a message contained in the context as in the text must be understood first (Hall, in Gudykunts, 2002). Hall (1976) added that an important thing in communication is the context, which is divided into two dimensions, i.e., high-context and low-context. The high-context refers to the physical context or the relationship of information which is not fully coded explicitly, as it has internalized meaning of the non-verbal signs. In low-context, people will see the meaning of the behavior of other parties in the clean and explicit message on the sign itself. High-context situations, together with environmental information, context, circumstances and non-verbal signs give meaning to the message, unlike the low-context, which gives meaning in accordance with the code itself. The message in low-context nature is usually clear and unambiguous. Members of the collective nature of culture use more high-context messages, and on the contrary members of individualistic cultures use low-context messages (Gudykunts, 2002).

In Indonesia and many Asian countries in general, people are more likely to use high-context messages, where every message is always understood as a whole, not just the message itself. Therefore, misunderstandings often occur when reading a message. For example there is a short message from a student who says hello to the Tutor: “*Hai DB ...*”.

From the example of online conversation above, what is written by the student is nothing wrong denotatively. However, because the tutor is a person of Javanese culture origin who is familiar with the use of a Javanese language in the hierarchy interaction, the tutor then gives a different connotative meaning to those words. Tutors felt uncomfortable and thought that the student was not polite and did not respect the tutor in terms of interpersonal roles.

If this happens, who's to blame or who is take a responsibility for this? Meaning and action is formed by the constitutive rules, which are used by communicators to understand and interpret an event or message, and by regulative rules as an important rule of an action. These contexts form the rules. For example, when a student feel great, students will act as they think in mind. When they are in good and open environment, they will act in a different style (Gudykunts, 2002).

In the online interaction particularly, we never know for sure what the rules are used by others, and coordination or between the two are essential. The main problem that arises in interacting online with others is how to identify the nature of semantic meaning from what is said and this is called interactional meaning, which refers to the meaning contained in the communicator and communicants. In the interactional meaning, there are aspects relating to what one ought to do, how social action should be displayed, how the character of interaction situations occur, or how the relationship between communicators and communicants take place. These aspects are important in situations of effective communication.

In interactional meaning, there are three levels of interaction, i.e., (1) speech act, as the beginning of an interaction, (2) frame as the situation when and how communications take place, and (3) frame as the context, in which this condition can be modified or reorganized by the way we talk, and where the identity of communicators is inherent in the sentence. Each conversation can be seen from what is said and the meaning of the interaction. This all comes from the message content combined with the context. The conversation will not be understood without a close look at the context, referred to as contextual signs by Gumperz (in Whaley & Samter, 2007). This means that when people interact and have the same contextual signs, such as from the same social background, this will reduce problems in the interaction, including in the use of voice intonation, and the situation at the time of interaction. To understand the situation very well, the role of non-verbal communication cannot be ignored. Signs of non-verbal communication are used to convey meaning.

As suggested by Bargoon, 1994, the non-verbal signs have several characteristics, namely referring to analog, iconicity or containing symbols, and universal and simultaneous meaning. These characteristics mean that all movements are realized by all of the gestures interrelated with the environment and transmitted at once. In other words, all non-verbal signs are often transmitted automatically and spontaneously. As an illustration, online tutorials or other forms of communication through online, only use words to convey a verbal message or information. It does not use emotexts or emoticons to express feelings. For example, I took one of the dialogues that occurs in online tutorials in Public Speaking course as the following.

- Student A: *Gimana kalau public speaker-nya autis (What if the public speaker is an autis, is it possible to give a speech ?)*
- Student B : *Mungkinkah orang autis bisa jadi seorang public speaking? Apakah dia mampu & apakah audience percaya akan kemampuan dia?... Perlu ditinjau ulang lagi pertanyaan sdr. A tersebut ... (Is it possible for an autis to be a public speaker? And do they have a capability and do the audience trust him? We need to reconsider the question of Student A ...)*
- Tutor : *Dear all... pertama saya tanggapi soal istilah yaa, kalau pembicara sebutannya public speaker, sedangkan kegiatannya public speaking, dan kita singkat saja menjadi PS. Kedua, penderita autis memang saja bisa berpidato, hanya saja saya belum pernah mengalami mengajar atau melihat penderita autis pidato... kalau ada temens yang pernah melihat atau mengalami, silahkan berbagi pengalaman yaaaasalam, db (Dear all, first, my respons goes to Student B yaa, we call someone who gives a speech as a public speaker, and for the activity, we call it public speaking. Secondly, an autis person can be a speaker, but unfortunately I have never seen it.... if someone has an experience about that, please share with us in this session regards, db)*

From the dialogue above, the meaning represents only verbal meaning, that is inherent in the words that are used, and this is called denotative meaning. Furthermore, the attitude or dialogue style of the people involved is not visible in this dialog, such as facial expression and voice intonation. This is what is missing in the process of online interaction.

Non-verbal signs, such as kinesic, prosemic and artifacts, can communicate who we are. Someone in a particular social group will not leave his or her individual identities. Various theories indicate that people are motivated by a desire to maintain positive impression for other parties, or in other words they always need a good assessment of the other parties (Brown & Levinson; Chlenker, Britt & Pennington; and Tracy in Whaley, 2007). A study conducted by Daly & Hogg (1983) on the use of non-verbal communication methods has found out that the first impression begins with the first meeting when they see the way of dress, hairstyle and overall appearance. Another study conducted by DePaulo (1992) has indicated that presentation of self is a way to create a certain impression to others to communicate the image of oneself to others in non-verbal way.

Non-verbal signs are often considered as being more important than verbal signs in determining the meaning of a message. Because the signs of non-verbal communication is always present everywhere and embedded in order to each process of communication, so it is important to look at non-verbal behaviour in applying communication theory, and there is no doubt that non-verbal signs play major roles in any process of interaction (Whaley & Samter, 2007). The construction social reality theory explains that reality is constructed through the process of interaction within a group, community and culture, so everybody is socially constructed (Littlejohn, 2006). The self is individual and social (Littlejohn, 2002).

Interpersonal communication

Interpersonal communication is a form of practice and an art, which its effectiveness in communicating and relating with friends, spouse, colleagues or boss depends on how our interpersonal skills. Carlock (1999) said that our ability to communicate in interpersonal situations can give strengths to achieve various goals, such as make friends, maintain and strengthen good relations in everyday life and advance career, interact with various people from different cultures, and more importantly establish self-esteem.

Interpersonal communication can be interpreted in various ways, in the form of pairs or dyadic or relational, based on the number of interactions and relations. Dyadic communication happens between two people who know each other or are already connected. Interpersonal communication is a process which begins with impersonal and develops to be personal in nature through a process of interaction (DeVito, 2001).

Social interaction occurs between two people or more, with the essence that everyone acting through adjustments to the other party. When we are around other people, we normally are actors and communicate intentionally. Social interaction means that someone has taken part in other people, communicate with others and interpret the actions of the other party. Social interaction is important because it creates the quality of a person, is what someone does in a situation, and establishes their identities to form a community (Charon, 2004). And this indicates that everyone is behaving on the basis of the influence of other parties (Goodman, 1992). Social interaction studies explain the behavior at the micro level, which focuses on people in their daily activities. According to Mead (in Freese & Burke, 1988), social interaction occurs in an experience where the individual and the environment intersect with each other, and as individuals intersect with other individuals. This illustrates that people with their activities are central to the theory of social interaction.

In Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation (FIRO), Schutz (1958) pointed the existence of three interpersonal needs, that is, the need for inclusion, control and affection. He said if someone would start a relationship, he or she would have to fulfill one of these requirements. Inclusion is the need to be accepted or recognized as part of a community, affection is a feeling like love and attention, while control is a condition that would limit actions as human beings. All of these interpersonal needs should ideally exist in every interaction. In an online or distance learning environment, such as in UT, these three things must exist in each of the online interaction. How to make students feel welcome in an online environment becomes the main factor in this process. In addition, distance educators must also be aware of what and how life looks like in offline interactions that occur among them. On the other hand, students' feelings of being appreciated is implied in comments given by tutors. For example, in online tutorials for Public Speaking course, tutors use the word "Dear Friends" to greet the students. This is intended to fill the gap between students and tutors so that there is no communication barrier among them.

In online tutorial for the Public Speaking course, these factors are present. However, in practice the existence of these factors is minimal, except for the inclusion factor, which can be applied in this online tutorial. The factor of affection and control, can be applied but very limited. For example, in terms of control, a tutor cannot ensure that the assignments submitted by the students are the work of the students themselves, or the results of the group discussion, or copy-pasting from fellow students. Then, in terms of affection, tutors experienced no emotional involvement in the process of this interaction, because messages were expressed through written words.

Computer mediated communication (CMC)

Relational patterns and affection that occur in the face-to-face mode and CMC are different, due to lack of nonverbal communication that accompanies interactions through CMC (Sedyaningsih, 2010). Several empirical studies show that CMC are lacking the emotional or personal touch than face to face (Rice in Walther, 1992). Social presence theory through an electronic communication system differs in its ability to give more information about facial expression, looking at each other, posture, clothes and non-verbal and vocal signs. Therefore, the level of social presence of CMC is low and this affects the nature of the message. The message can be impersonal (Walther, 1992).

There are three basic forms of CMC systems, namely **email, news group, and chat programs**. In **email**, users send messages to other users, while **news groups** are used by many people to discuss a topic in a group. Both of them (email and news group) are a form of asynchronous communication, in which users can send, receive and read messages in a fairly broad time range, while the **chat program** is synchronous and in real time (Reid, 1991).

When compared to the form of interaction in general, the CMC has four differences, namely the absence of regular feedback, dramaturgical weakness, lack of social signs, and social anonymity (Kiesler, et.al, 1984). In CMC interaction there is the lack of physical togetherness in terms of environment, eye contact, physical touch and non-verbal signs, as users interact through the medium of CMC in rough texts or graphical representations. Without social signs or feedback, such as in face-to-face interaction, CMC users deal with everything in greater freedom and should create alternative meanings to communicate and interact, so that the

interaction through CMC allows the formation of new assumptions about social boundaries within which the state of the anonymous and without boundary produces a dramatic effect.

Communication and interaction in the Public Speaking course online tutorial are still be given verbally, which mean that there are no insert images or videos to enhance learning, making it less motivating to participants. The use of emoticons or emotexts become key words to complement verbal communication. With a good understanding of CMC, the implementation of online tutorial courses that deliver verbal messages will be more easily provided. The challenge for the online educators are to design online learning services that assist and enhance students' learning through the use of images and videos in online learning.

Conclusions

Based on the above discussion, it can be said that the interaction through the CMC, will minimise non-verbal signs in every message. This may imply that the social signs embedded in a person are never actually present. Therefore, some conclusions can be drawn as follows.

1. Interaction through CMC not directly included in a physical context would lose the real meaning derived from cultural values.
2. The absence of non-verbal signs in interactions results in meanings that are interpreted verbally, so that the interactions through CMC minimise meanings of the roles of teachers and students.
3. The absence of a physical context, called decontextualisation (Sedyaningsih, 2010), indirectly will dismiss the meanings of the personal nature of a person, such as inclusion, affection and control.

From the three issues, online learning has three advantages in terms of extent, speed and simultaneity of disseminating information. Thus, dissemination of information and knowledge can occur widely and quickly, then there is also equal treatment of anyone involved in this learning process. It can be concluded that online learning process is material in nature, and there is a lack of emotional and spiritual aspects. Furthermore, the meaning derived from online learning system lacks the physical aspects and cultural values, because interactins are expressed through a computer.

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