EXPLORING STUDENTS' CHALLENGES AND LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ONLINE TUTORIALS FOR ACADEMIC WRITING COURSES

Daniel Pasaribu[1], Bambang Agus Diana[2]

[1, 2]*Universitas Terbuka (INDONESIA)*

[*]daniel.pasaribu@ecampus.ut.ac.id

Abstract

Online tutorials have become a core component of distance learning, particularly in academic writing courses, where the development of scholarly communication skills is crucial. This study explores the challenges experienced by distance learners and the learning strategies they adopt when engaging with online tutorials for academic writing. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered from 30 undergraduate students enrolled in a distance education program through open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal several recurring challenges, including limited internet access, time management issues, reduced tutor interaction, and difficulties in understanding academic conventions independently. In response, students employed adaptive learning strategies such as self-scheduled study plans, peer collaboration in online groups, use of digital writing tools, and independent access to supplementary learning materials. The study highlights the importance of interactive tutorial design, active tutor engagement, and enhanced learner support mechanisms in fostering effective academic writing skills in an online, distance learning context.

Keywords: academic writing, distance learning, learning strategies, online tutorial, self-regulated learning

1 INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation in education has brought fundamental changes to the ways universities design, deliver, and evaluate learning processes. Online learning models have become not merely a complement but an integral part of higher education systems, particularly in institutions that adopt distance education. According to Garrison and Anderson (2003), online learning is grounded in cognitive, social, and teaching interactions, all of which must be carefully managed to ensure optimal academic quality. With the advancement of information and communication technology, universities are required to adapt by providing flexible, interactive, and accessible learning experiences that meet the increasingly diverse needs of students.

The Indonesian Open University (*Universitas Terbuka* or UT), as a state university dedicated to distance education, exemplifies an institution that has consistently implemented technology-based learning. UT was established to provide wide, flexible, and affordable

access to higher education for Indonesian society, including those living in remote areas (Tampubolon, 2020). The online tutorial (*tuton*) system has become one of UT's primary strategies to facilitate academic interaction between students and lecturers. Online tutorials are not merely a medium for delivering content but also serve as a platform for discussion, inquiry, and the structured development of academic skills (Kusnandar & Siahaan, 2018).

One of the essential courses delivered through online tutorials is *Scientific Writing*. This course plays a strategic role as it equips students with the ability to write in an academic manner that is systematic, logical, critical, and aligned with scholarly conventions. Academic writing is regarded as a fundamental form of *academic literacy* within higher education (Lea & Street, 1998). Through this course, students are expected to produce academic texts that not only meet formal requirements but also demonstrate critical and analytical thinking skills. Nevertheless, academic writing is often perceived as a considerable challenge for students, particularly when the learning process is conducted in an online setting.

Prior studies have highlighted the unique challenges of online learning. Moore (1993) introduced the concept of *transactional distance*, which refers to the psychological and communication gap between students and instructors in distance education. Such gaps may lead to feelings of isolation, reduced motivation, and difficulties in comprehending academic instructions. For UT students, these challenges may be further compounded by diverse socio-economic and geographical backgrounds, which affect access to technology, internet stability, and study time availability (Hidayat, 2021).

In addition to technical challenges, students also face non-technical issues such as time management, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulated learning capacity. Zimmerman's (2002) theory of *self-regulated learning* emphasizes the importance of planning, monitoring, and self-evaluating throughout the independent learning process. In the context of the *Scientific Writing* online tutorial, students are required to develop appropriate learning strategies to cope with these challenges. Such strategies may include time management skills, the use of supplementary learning resources, active participation in online forums, and the establishment of peer-learning networks.

Moreover, the *Community of Inquiry* framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) underscores the importance of *cognitive presence*, *social presence*, and *teaching presence* in online learning. These dimensions are essential indicators of students' quality of learning experiences in online tutorials. However, realizing such conditions requires active

participation from both students and tutors. Without adaptive learning strategies, students may struggle to fully comprehend the course content, particularly in scientific writing, which demands methodological precision and academic consistency.

Based on these considerations, it is evident that online tutorials in the *Scientific Writing* course at Universitas Terbuka involve complex challenges. These challenges encompass technical, pedagogical, and psychological dimensions that can influence the effectiveness of the learning process. Therefore, it is important to explore not only the obstacles faced by students but also the learning strategies they employ to adapt to the dynamics of online learning. This study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how UT students encounter difficulties in the *Scientific Writing* online tutorial while also identifying the strategies they utilize. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective online tutorial designs, support the achievement of intended learning outcomes, and enhance academic quality within the context of distance education.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative exploratory approach to investigate the challenges faced by students and the learning strategies they employed while participating in online tutorials for the Academic Writing course at Universitas Terbuka. The exploratory design was chosen to capture the depth and variety of students' experiences in the context of distance education, where online tutorials serve as a key medium for interaction and learning support.

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 30 undergraduate students from the Social Sciences program at Universitas Terbuka who completed the online tutorial for the Academic Writing course. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experience with the course and tutorial system. This number was considered sufficient to reach data saturation in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.2 Data Collection

Data was collected through two instruments:

1. Open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Forms, which invited students to describe the challenges they encountered and the strategies they adopted during the online tutorial.

2. In-depth interviews conducted via Zoom with 10 selected participants to gain more nuanced insights into their learning experiences.

Both instruments were designed to encourage reflective and detailed responses regarding academic, technical, and motivational aspects of the learning process. The use of multiple sources of data (questionnaires and interviews) served as a form of methodological triangulation to enhance credibility (Patton, 2015).

2.3   Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using content analysis, following the framework outlined by Krippendorff (2013) and Schreier (2012). The process involved several stages:

1. Data preparation: Transcribing interview recordings verbatim and exporting students' responses from the questionnaires into text format.

2. Coding: Identifying key statements related to challenges (e.g., internet access, workload, lack of feedback) and strategies (e.g., time management, peer collaboration, self-regulated learning). Codes were applied systematically to all textual data.

3. Categorization: Grouping similar codes into broader categories, such as *technical challenges, motivational challenges, academic challenges*, and *cognitive, social, and metacognitive strategies*.

4. Interpretation: Analyzing patterns and relationships between categories to understand how specific strategies addressed certain challenges.

5. Validation: To ensure trustworthiness, peer debriefing with fellow researchers and member checking with selected participants were conducted.

2.4   Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to research ethics standards. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained electronically, and participants' identities were kept anonymous to protect confidentiality.

3   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the experiences of students in online tutorials for the Academic Writing course at Universitas Terbuka, and they reflect broader trends in distance learning. As the abstract indicates, online tutorials have become a central component of distance education, particularly in courses focused on academic writing, where the acquisition of scholarly communication skills is both complex and indispensable. The analysis of student responses revealed several recurring challenges—spanning technical,

motivational, and academic dimensions—along with adaptive strategies that students employed to sustain their engagement.

A central theme that emerged is the persistence of technical barriers. Students consistently cited limited internet access, unstable connectivity, and inadequate devices as significant impediments to their learning. For students in remote or rural areas, unreliable electricity and poor signal coverage meant that they often missed real-time discussions or struggled to submit assignments on time. Such challenges mirror the structural inequalities commonly discussed in distance learning research (Moore, 1993; Krippendorff, 2013), where access to infrastructure fundamentally shapes learners' opportunities to participate. In the context of academic writing, these technical disruptions also meant that students had less time to practice drafting, revising, and receiving feedback on their work, potentially slowing the acquisition of essential scholarly communication skills.

Beyond infrastructure, non-technical challenges played an equally critical role. The findings showed that students often struggled with time management, particularly those balancing professional or familial responsibilities alongside their studies. Several participants noted that tutorial schedules clashed with work obligations, forcing them to delay or miss participation in discussions. In addition, the absence of a physical classroom environment weakened their motivation, while limited tutor interaction reduced their confidence in understanding complex academic conventions such as citation, plagiarism thresholds, and methodological rigor. This echoes Zimmerman's (2002) framework of *self-regulated learning*, where learners in distance education are compelled to take a more autonomous role in planning, monitoring, and sustaining their academic efforts. For academic writing courses, this lack of direct support can be particularly acute, given the nuanced skills required for scholarly communication.

Nevertheless, the study also revealed that students developed adaptive strategies to mitigate these challenges. Self-scheduled study plans were commonly mentioned, with students creating weekly timetables, prioritizing assignments, and breaking down writing tasks into smaller components to reduce stress. This form of self-regulation not only helped students cope with competing demands but also reinforced independent learning habits essential for long-term success in academic writing. Peer collaboration also emerged as a significant resource: students created informal groups on WhatsApp and Telegram to exchange references, provide feedback on drafts, and explain difficult concepts in simpler terms. This practice reflects the *social presence* dimension of the Community of Inquiry framework

(Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), demonstrating how collaborative spaces outside the formal platform can substitute for limited institutional interaction. Furthermore, students reported leveraging digital writing tools, online journals, and video tutorials as supplementary resources, which helped them bridge gaps in understanding academic conventions and strengthened their capacity for independent inquiry.

The role of tutors was another salient finding. Students emphasized that feedback from tutors—particularly comments on assignments—was instrumental in improving their writing. Such guidance clarified academic conventions, including proper citation, structuring arguments, and developing logical coherence in essays. However, students also highlighted the limitations of asynchronous forums, which often left their questions unanswered in real time. Several participants recommended more synchronous sessions via Zoom or other platforms to foster greater interactivity and immediacy in feedback. This underscores the critical importance of *teaching presence* in distance education (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). For academic writing courses, where iterative feedback is central to skill development, tutor engagement becomes not merely supportive but indispensable.

Taken together, these findings resonate strongly with the abstract's emphasis on the dual nature of online tutorials as both an opportunity and a challenge for distance learners. On the one hand, students face recurring barriers limited internet, time constraints, reduced tutor interaction, and difficulties in mastering academic writing conventions independently. On the other hand, their adaptive strategies-regulation, peer collaboration, use of digital tools, and supplementary learning illustrate the agency of learners in navigating the complexities of distance education. This interplay highlights the resilience of students but also underscores the institutional responsibility to design online tutorials that are more interactive, engaging, and supportive.

From a broader perspective, this study reinforces the argument that the effectiveness of online academic writing tutorials depends on a balance between infrastructure (ensuring equitable access to platforms and connectivity), pedagogy (enhancing teaching presence and interactive design), and learner agency (developing skills in self-regulation and collaboration). For distance education systems like Universitas Terbuka, strengthening these three pillars is crucial to fostering the scholarly communication skills that students need not only to succeed in their coursework but also to contribute meaningfully to academic discourse.

4   CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the challenges faced by students and the strategies they employed in online tutorials for the Academic Writing course at Universitas Terbuka. The findings revealed that the students' learning experiences were shaped by a complex interplay of technical and non-technical factors. On the technical side, unstable internet connections, frequent power disruptions, and limited access to appropriate learning devices emerged as persistent barriers. These infrastructural issues not only delayed students' participation in discussions but also limited their ability to submit assignments on time and engage fully in the writing process.

Equally important were the non-technical challenges that students encountered. Many struggled to sustain motivation in the absence of a classroom atmosphere, and the asynchronous nature of online tutorials reduced opportunities for real-time clarification and meaningful interaction with tutors. Time management was another critical issue, particularly for students who were balancing professional responsibilities alongside their studies. Furthermore, difficulties in independently understanding academic conventions, such as citation rules and scholarly argumentation, added an additional layer of complexity to their learning process.

Despite these obstacles, students displayed resilience by adopting a variety of adaptive learning strategies. Many relied on self-regulated learning techniques, such as creating structured study schedules, breaking down assignments into smaller tasks, and keeping concise notes. Others turned to peer collaboration, forming informal study groups on platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram to exchange ideas, clarify misunderstandings, and provide feedback on one another's writing. Students also supplemented official course materials with additional digital resources, such as online journals, video tutorials, and writing tools. These strategies highlight the agency of learners in distance education and reflect their capacity to adapt to challenging learning environments.

The role of tutors was found to be equally pivotal. Students valued the constructive feedback they received on assignments, noting that it improved their writing and provided clearer direction on academic standards. However, they also emphasized the need for more interactive engagement, suggesting that synchronous sessions and varied instructional media could better support the development of academic writing skills. These findings reinforce the

importance of teaching presence in online learning, particularly in courses that demand continuous practice and detailed guidance, such as academic writing.

From these insights, several recommendations can be drawn. First, the university should prioritize improving technological infrastructure to ensure reliable and equitable access to online tutorials, especially for students in rural areas. Second, tutors should be encouraged to diversify their teaching approaches by incorporating synchronous sessions, interactive materials, and more detailed feedback. Third, institutions should consider formalizing peer-learning opportunities, building on the informal study groups already established by students. Finally, students themselves would benefit from greater institutional support in developing self-regulated learning skills, time management practices, and digital literacy.

In conclusion, online tutorials for academic writing are both a challenge and an opportunity for distance learners. While infrastructural and pedagogical barriers persist, the strategies adopted by students demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to their academic progress. By enhancing technological support, strengthening tutor engagement, and fostering collaborative and interactive tutorial environments, distance education institutions such as Universitas Terbuka can play a vital role in equipping students with the scholarly communication skills that are essential for success in higher education and beyond.

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