# Empowering Students through Tutor's Feedback in Online Learning

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**Abstract**
Online learning students may encounter adjustment difficulties particularly in the early semesters. Students with lack of computer literacy and related educational background might result in withdrawal from the course of study prematurely. The current research was carried out to investigate tutor's feedback as a means to empower online learning students, including to build autonomy, help-seeking initiatives, and connectivity. The qualitative descriptive analysis was conducted on 135 students and tutors' comments given in three different online classes. The primary data were students and tutor's comments. To explore more information from the students, a set of open-ended questions provided at the end of the online tutorial sessions. Data analysis adopted thematic analysis. Three main themes were identified, including independent learning, connectivity, and help-seeking initiatives. Meanwhile, an emerging theme was identified, namely solitary learning styles. The findings indicate that tutor's feedback played an important role in empowering students. Individual feedback helped students understand independent learning more comprehensively, build connectivity with tutor and institution, and find possible solutions for each problem they met. Students with solitary learning styles, however, preferred feedback that pointed out the weaknesses or inappropriate answers they submitted. In addition, they showed lack interest in other feedback given by the tutor.


Keywords: autonomy, connectivity, feedback, help-seeking initiatives, and online learning

**Introduction**

This paper reports the results of the study that investigated the tutor's feedback as a means to empower online learning students. The study was conducted in Indonesia which involved students of Universitas Terbuka who took translation online tutorials in three different classes in the first semester of 2018. These online tutorials were capped at 150 students per class and lasted eight weeks (8-week sessions). The Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) were used to deliver the online tutorials.

Several activities were offered in each session, including group discussions, additional learning materials and resources, and formative tests. The tutor supervised and participated in the group discussion. The tutor also encouraged the inactive students to comment or convey their ideas. To make a more extended the discussion, the tutor raised some further relevant issues and provided additional learning material as an enrichment which is relevant to the issues being discussed. In the third, fifth, and seventh sessions, the students had to do assignments individually. In the following weeks, the tutor returned the assignments with individual formative feedback. The students may comment on the feedback given and discuss it with the tutor and other students within the class.

It is important to bear in mind that participating the in online tutorials are elective. In other words, the students may not enroll in the online tutorials. In addition, they may withdraw from their online classes at any time. Furthermore, if a student does not log in and access the online classes for three weeks consecutively, his enrollment is automatically removed from the class. Although it is elective, the scores of student participation and assignments contribute 30% towards the final grades.

**Literature review**

Feedback plays a vital role in the learning process, including in a distance learning environment. Distance learning students who feel alone and isolated (Budiman, 2015) may receive benefits from the feedback giving by the tutors. A study conducted by Jokar and Soyoof (2014) to investigate the effect of explicit and implicit corrective feedback on learners' grammatical accuracy found that feedback is unique and individual. In other words, there is no one feedback template fits all. Similar finding was echoed by Ene and Upton (2018). This indicates that to make feedback effective tool to help students learn better, tutors should be aware of the characteristics of the subject(s) they teach and the students.

A multi-stage study conducted by Burns and Foo (2013) that examined students' perspective on feedback, both formative and grades. Surprisingly, the study found out some interesting findings. For instance, feedback did not affect students' confidence. The study also was unable to answer how the students used the feedback for better learning. Although the context is different from the current study, the nature of the study is particularly similar so that it provides valuable insights into the nature of feedback.

**Methods**

Data for this study were collected from student-tutor interaction in the discussion forum as well as from the open-ended questions. All students participating in three different classes were invited to answer three questions provided at the end of session 8. The questions were in the form of open-ended questions that sought students' views on the tutor's feedback given for the assignments and for their comments on the discussion forum. At the end of the questions, a space was provided in case they wanted to add some comments. The benefit of this approach was that more comprehensive and personal information could be obtained as the students had more autonomy to express their experiences and comments that might be unique and individual. To maintain confidentiality, it was mentioned that completing the questions were not mandatory; students might skip the questions they did not want to answer, or they might refuse to answer all the questions. The questions were:

1. What did you think of the feedback given by the tutor?
2. How did the feedback help you learn the subject?
3. What did you learn from the feedback given?

There were 135 responses to the questions. Each response was analyzed to group for thematic analysis, reduce redundancy, display, and yield the conclusion (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

**Findings and Discussion**

The tutor's feedback basically fell into two main categories, including constructive feedback and corrective feedback. In addition, the tutor also provided guidance and links to resources that introduces the students to new information and ideas. Both constructive and corrective feedback were given individually. A number of issues were identified. Mostly, the students positively valued the feedback, particularly the formative feedback. Examples of the tutor's feedback given to the students are:

> *Check subject-verb agreement! (Tutor)*
> *Which one is correct, di dalam or didalam? (Tutor was correcting the preposition in Indonesian). (Tutor)*
> *I suggest that you read PUEBI. Check the link I provide. (Tutor)*

The students admitted that they learned from the feedback. One student gave a comment as follows.

> *Thank you. I did not know if Guardian is a name of newspaper. (the student translated Guardian into penjaga (Indonesian for guardian)). (students)*

A response given by a student to the tutor's comment was:

> *Thank your Sir. I will check the PUEBI. (Student)*

Three main themes were identified, including encouraging independent learning, building connectivity, and developing help-seeking initiatives. One theme was emerging during data analysis, namely solitary learning styles.

*Encouraging independent learning*
The theme of encouraging independent learning reoccurred throughout the data set. Common comments given by the tutor are:

> *I think you did not fully understand the source text. Consequently, the translation was not good. I suggest that you have more reading practice. Try to make a daily program. (Tutor)*
> *The topic for the discussion is based on the materials in the link below. Please check and give your comment in the Discussion Forum. (Tutor)*

Most of the students' responses to the tutor's comments were particularly short, including *Thank you* and *Thank you, Sir*.

The open-ended questions generated deeper information. Students felt more positive about the comments given by the tutor. One student commented:

> *I thank you for your feedback. There are some words I don't know the meaning in Indonesian. Therefore, I cannot understand the passage. I don't know where to find the meaning. (Student)*

*Building connectivity*

Distance learning students are naturally separated from each other. However, online tutorials may function as a connector. The students are able to connect with their colleagues and the tutor. The tutor in his comment encouraged the students to communicate with each other in the discussion forum by actively commented on their peers' comments or ideas.

> *Please comment on your friends' ideas. (Tutor)*
> *As this is a discussion forum, feel free to give your opinions or ideas. There is no right or wrong answer. (Tutor)*
> *I will be participating in a group discussion after at least five students gave comments. (Tutor)*

Students received benefits from the discussion forum. They interacted with each other. A comment below illustrates the interaction among the students.

> *Hallo, XXX (name of a student). Your answer is very clear. But, I think you forgot to attach the source of the information. Be aware of plagiarism. Thank you. (Student)*

It is important to note that the interaction among the students was particularly low. It seemed that they were uninterested to participate in group discussions.

*Developing help-seeking initiatives*
Another effort to empower the students was through developing their help-seeking initiatives. Developing help-seeking initiatives was important to broaden the students'

knowledge and experience. The tutor commonly provided a link to a webpage and materials in PDF for further learning and discussion. A comment given by the tutor is:

> *To know further about equivalence in translation, please check the following website. (Tutor)*

*Solitary learning styles*

There were some negative comments given by a student. The student indicated that he was neither interested in the discussion nor guidance from the tutor. The student preferred to have corrective feedback that showed the mistakes and the correction from the tutor instead of looking for further information about the mistakes by himself. The students seemed to have different learning styles and enjoy learning individually. The student said:

> *I am not interested in group discussion. It was not interesting. I don't like to read feedback that ask me to read more information. I want the tutor shows me the mistakes and how answers should be. That is all. (Student)*

The themes above indicates that the students valued the feedback from the tutor. Although student interaction in group discussion was low, the comments indicate that interaction in distance learning is one of the key components to ensure the effective learning process. Feedback cannot be separated from the learning process as students need it (Tait, 2003). Feedback is a communication channel that connects the students and the tutor. The students liked individual formative feedback better than scores or grades. This finding is contrary to previous studies, including the study conducted by Burns and Foo (2013) which have suggested that students valued feedback given in the form of score or grades. For most students, feedback helped them learn the subject better. The students also appreciated feedback that included further information and explanation. Individual formative feedback served as a reflection to evaluate the competency level of the students in the subject they were taking. This result also reflects those of Jokar and Soyoof (2014) who also found that explicit feedback was the best tool to improve student writing skills. Another important point is that the tutor should consider punctual and appropriate feedback. This finding is consistent with that of Bruno and Santos (2010) who argued that feedback should be given timely.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of the current study was to investigate tutor's feedback as a tool to empower online learning students. The results of this investigation showed that feedback was an effective medium for empowering distance learning students. Formative feedback enabled the students who were separated geographically to build independent learning skills, build connectivity, and develop help-seeking initiatives. The study also found that feedback should be given timely and individually. Although the findings are particularly rich, the study has some limitations. The most important limitation lies in the fact that the students know that the researcher was their tutor. Although it was mentioned that the researcher guaranteed privacy and confidentiality, participant biases might occur.

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