

## Online Tutorials on Advanced Writing Skills Course: A Case Study of Distance Learning<sup>1</sup>

**Karnedi**

English Language and Literature Department  
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences  
Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

### Abstract

Writing in English at the advanced level often refers to the *process of writing*. As a process, it normally goes through a series of stages such as *prewriting*, *outlining*, *writing*, and *revising*. However, teaching writing within the context of distance higher education is mostly delivered through the Internet. This paper explores an online tutorial package that is specially designed for advanced level students to improve their proficiency in writing essays. For this purpose, a research question was developed: To what extent can the technology-based online tutorial help both the tutors and the students in the teaching and learning process? A critical analysis of this practice in association with the notion of *admission test* to an undergraduate degree programme in translation, in particular, was then followed by a detailed discussion. Conclusions drawn from this case study are in two folds; on one hand, online advanced writing course tutorials can be considered as an alternative strategy for students to their competency in writing essays which have been achieved by learning through printed self-instructional modular packages (i.e., Writing 4 course module), and on the other, the findings are closely linked to some students' poor writing performance prior to pursuing translation core courses could have a possible impact on retention rates in the long run.

**Keywords:** Admission test advanced writing skills course, retention rate, students' performance, online tutorial.

## Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to share my own experiences, not only as a course writer but also as a tutor of *Writing 4*, an advanced writing skills course (Karnedi, 2003). The English language skill is provided for the students of the translation programme at the English Language and Literature Department of Indonesia Open University (*Universitas Terbuka / UT*). Since 2010, I have been dealing with the advanced writing skills course tutorial, in which I have tried to integrate my years of experience and expertise in designing and writing the language skills course books for self-study purposes into the Internet-based learning format, as opposed to the traditional classroom context.

Even though there are a few resources available for teaching writing skills that are mainly in the form of printed materials, specially-designed learning materials for teaching writing skills online remain scarce (Warnock, 2009, p. x). However, like any other open universities worldwide, UT has been pioneering and developing technology-based learning materials for years, including writing skills course materials delivered online known as UT-Online tutorials, that appear on the university's website as part of its academic support services (Zuhairi, Adnan, & Thaib, 2007).

This practice of course is in line with the current trend of online courses that now becomes more popular at the tertiary level throughout Indonesia. The students who have registered for a couple of courses are encouraged to involve and participate in related online tutorials without obstructed by any geographical constraints and also temporal borders. This is not only a good opportunity for them to enhance their learning process but it also serves as both a social and an academic forum for them to discuss and share ideas with other fellow students at the university. In that way, learning through the virtual world is not be necessarily solitary and isolated. Above all, their participation in the online tutorial package can significantly contribute to the final marks of certain courses they take in each semester, or during a particular registered semester. In other words, online method of learning materials delivery will increasingly be in use in the future.

UT has actually been on the right track in terms of instructional design without neglecting its multimedia-based printed learning materials. The question for both the tutors and the students, including other stakeholders of open and distance learning, is how to make full use of these teaching and learning technologies for the sake of promoting lifelong learning for all.

As part of UT-Online courses, the online advanced writing skills course tutorial is a supplementary material that the students can access and use to improve their writing skills to the advanced level. At this level, they are required to produce simple essays on a given topic or a context for writing such as writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper or a magazine in response to a current issue or a topic raised in the daily (White, 1987; Karnedi, 2003).

## Teaching Writing Online

One of the latest references widely quoted by many scholars in relation to teaching writing online is *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* by Warnock (2009). He proposed a number of core guidelines for teachers of online courses to consider. Some book reviewers consider some of those guidelines as more or less similar to the methods that are widely practiced in face-to-

face classrooms, whereas some other critics regard them as something quite useful since they contain a theory and a pedagogy for teaching writing online. Below are some of the guidelines proposed by the writer.

*Guideline 1:* Teaching writing online offers you new ways to apply theoretical and pedagogical concepts about writing. It can provide you with different ways of disseminating, sharing, reviewing, and responding to students' texts.

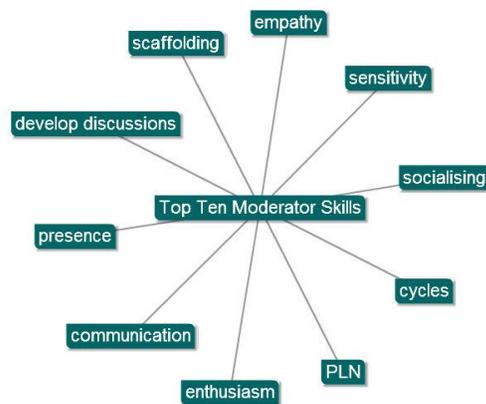
*Guideline 2:* Initially, you want to think *migration*, not *transformation*, when teaching online. Think about what you do well, and then think about how you can use various resources to *translate* those skills into the OWcourse.

*Guideline 3:* Most prepackaged course management systems (CMS) have everything you need to help you translate your pedagogy into the OWcourse.

From the tutor's perspective, instructions given online can be both a different and a progressive approach since online writing tutorials provide opportunities for the students, including tutors, to exchange their writing that face-to-face classrooms cannot do. In addition to this, online writing tutorials also give opportunities for the students to produce more informal and developmental pieces of writing that can be developed into essay formats. This kind of activity is actually in line with *writing a draft* as part of the process of writing. More importantly, online writing tutorials make it possible for the students to communicate everything in the form of written work. This in turn indirectly *forces* them to write with the audience, purpose and context in mind, as pointed out by Warnock (2009, p. ix) "how teaching online opens an array of intriguing teaching and learning opportunities for writing instructors and their students."

Warnock then argued that several aspects of online writing tutorial need to be taken into consideration: (1) peer-review that can help the students assist each other; (2) give adequate feedback without discouraging; (3) grade student's work online, as well as pacing and also predictability that helps them get comfortable with the online writing course; (4) create collaboration among the students to work virtually in groups; (5) intellectual property in association with plagiarism, copyright and trust, the amount of time and efforts that tutors make; (6) marking as part of course assessment can tell us how well they are doing in the given tasks.

Unlike Warnock, Hockly (2010) proposed a list of top ten skills in the form of cluster mapping that makes a good tutor in handling online classes. Furthermore, he also suggested several main areas of soft skills that a tutor should have; these include qualifications, subject-matter-related knowledge, technical skills, online task/materials design skills and soft skills (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Soft Skills**

### **Methodology**

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the methodology used contains three parts: participants, procedures and data collection. As a qualitative research, this work employs a case study as the instrument for investigating utilisation of online technologies for an advanced writing skills course – *Writing 4* – offered in the curriculum of the undergraduate degree programme in translation at the UT, both from the pedagogical perspective (i.e., the tutor’s part) and from the students’ point of view in improving their writing skills at the advanced level. Apart from this method, the qualitative method of textual analysis is also adopted (Travers, 2001, pp. 4–5).

### **Participants**

In this study, a total of 119 students registered for the *Writing 4* during the semester 2 registration period of 2012; some of whom might have taken the course more than once because they failed in the previous examination. They took part in the online tutorial package after they had passed three other writing courses (i.e., *Writing 1–3*) as prerequisites. They are all translation students of the undergraduate degree programme in translation at UT. Having passed the four-level *Writing* skills courses, they are then eligible to take translation core courses as the major component of the curriculum.

### **Procedures**

Moodle Learning Management Systems (LMS) is a learning platform used at UT for running the online tutorial package for all courses. It provides a tool for engaging the students in forums or discussion where they can share their own writing experiences with their fellow coursemates and also with the tutor in-charge. All the teaching and learning activities are done through the virtual world.

The data used for analysis were obtained from the texts students produced during the advanced writing tutorials, which consist of eight initiations (Initiation 1–8) posted weekly, along with three other tasks given in Week 3 (for Task 1), Week 5 (for Task 2) and Week 7 (for Task 3). Task 1 has to do with the concepts of *coherence* and *cohesion* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976)

in which the students are asked, based on a good model of letter to the editor given earlier, to rearrange a set of jumble paragraphs in the letters to the editor to make a good paragraph structure.

In Task 2, however, they are put into a situation in which they need to give a reply to a business letter. In other words, the *audience*, *purpose* and *context* for writing are introduced at this stage. Basically, they play a role in this respect so that communication through the letter becomes more semi-authentic.

Finally in Task 3, they are instructed to produce a letter to the editor in response to an article on current issues published in a local newspaper. Once again, audience, purpose and context of writing, and the role to play in the written communication become clearer. In addition, there is lesser control from the tutor (i.e., student-centred) as opposed to the two previous tasks which are tutor-centred.

### **Data Collection**

As the data were retrieved from three different sources, namely the students' work in completing Task 1–3, each of them was processed separately. Meanwhile, each of the students' essays in soft copy form, which was written for each of the three tasks given and sent to the tutor via Moodle LMS, was marked holistically (Weir, 1990, pp. 66-68) using the marking scheme adapted from University of Cambridge's Local Examination Syndicates (UCLES).

The written tasks (i.e., students' essays for the three tasks) were marked according to the following criteria adapted from IELTS: *task achievement* (i.e., how far the students address the tasks given in their essay), *coherence* (i.e., the connection between ideas in each and/or across paragraphs in the essays) and *cohesion* (i.e., the relationship between sentences in a single paragraph), *lexical resource* (i.e., selection of vocabulary suitable for the advanced level of writing skills), *grammatical range* (i.e., correct use of more complex sentences) and *accuracy* (i.e., acceptable grammatical structure).

The students' participation in the eight initiations given and their active involvement in the weekly forums of discussion were also added up quantitatively. All the ongoing assessments contribute 30 percent to the students' final grade, in addition to the marks that they obtained from final examination with the total weightage of 70 percent.

### **Results and Discussion**

This part discusses results related to the online Writing 4 course tutorials. It includes several aspects of online writing tutorial highlighted by Warnock (2009) such as the students' collaboration in the forums of discussion, the tutor's responses in the form of feedback (Byrne, 1988), time spent and efforts made by the tutor in providing feedback, the phenomenon of plagiarism, and also how the students' essays are marked to see how well they did in the given tasks.

To begin with, the findings revealed that the online writing course tutorial does create opportunities for the participants to collaborate and share their ideas and knowledge about writing skills in the forums of discussion, as shown in the following extract (Table 1).

**Table 1. A Sample of Online Collaboration among Students**

<p><i>Wow...great! Dear Ayu, you've got the major understanding of the materials! I think we can conclude that the better the thesis is, the easier the</i></p>
---

*development we could do. We could try a narrower thesis such as the following: "Smoking, in relation to health and religion rules, creates contradiction among the leaders of some Islamic Sects in Indonesia". Don't you think it is easier to develop in our essay than the previous ones?*

*I guess "Smoking creates a contradiction between the leaders of several Islamic sects in Indonesia". It is easier to develop, because if you choose the topic: 'Smoking creates the contradiction in Indonesia ', to be much to discuss.*

*Contradiction about what? About who should not smoke, or is about smoking among students of high school, or is about governments should ban all cigarette factories? It's difficult and too broad to develop. The important thing is choosing a topic, adjust your interest and abilities, and supporting arguments. I agree with your opinion, Pak Sudaryono. I hope we can understand well about this initiation. Please give me feedback. Thanks.*

*Mbak*

*Mahmudah,*

*Well, I think so. "Smoking, in relation to health and religion rules, creates contradiction among the leaders of some Islamic Sects in Indonesia" is easier to develop as it is narrower than the previous ones. When the thesis is too broad, the arguments will also too broad, and it will make many difficulties to explain, or to provide it with arguments, evidences, or facts. The focus of the essay will be unclear.*

*How about your topic, "A Heavy Smoker Guy"? It's only appropriate for a short story of your real life...*

*"Smoking, in relation to health and religion rules, creates contradiction among the leaders of some Islamic Sects in Indonesia"*

*That is the thesis you wrote, Pooh... For me, It's esier to develop than other theses which you have suggested earlier. It's really general with a lot of way to grow the thesis and of course you have to find more resources to complete it and might give some bad impact on it. I mean the thesis will be viewed as too general and complicated.*

*I don't know why I like to choose "Smoking creates contradiction among the leaders of some Islamic Sects in Indonesia" If the other choice you gave is "'Smoking creates contradiction in Indonesia"...hehehe you still do not understad what I meant? I think you should learn the body language, Pooh ...hahahaha*

*Warm Regard*

As a tutor, I should also be available to help them give feedback on their work, either collectively or individually (Hyland, 1990; Johnson, 1990). I observed in the forums of discussion that the students had been discussing a language point for a couple of days. At the end of the week or before the materials for next initiation were posted, I joined the discussion by summarising the language point being discussed. The idea of this mediation is actually to enforce the students' knowledge of the topic given. In other words, enforcement by the tutor plays a crucial role in this respect so that the students can learn something from this forum.

As for the tutor's workload, giving feedback can be time consuming if a virtual class is too big such as in hundreds. In the Writing 4 course tutorials, there were a total of one hundred and nineteen students registered with the online course; however, only around one hundred students actively participated in the tutorial package and the others just accessed it once at the beginning of the tutorial sessions without learning or doing any exercises for each of the initiations.

Apart from the collective feedback given in the forums of discussion, individual feedback is also necessary to make the students less remote. They have someone, a tutor, to turn to whenever they have something to ask or are unclear about something pertaining to specific learning materials (Keh, 1990). Below are some examples of how individual feedback on the advanced writing course is delivered online (refer to Tasks 1, 2 and 3).

**Table 2. Sample Feedback on Task 1**

*Dear Wulan,*

*Below is the correct order of the six paragraphs.*

*Dear Editor,*

*It has come to our attention that you have published one of our business marketing 800 numbers in your quarterly and also in a hacker's bulletin board. The number you published is 1-800-775-55XX.*

*Our service is a commercial caller identification that operates throughout North America and provides needed information to law enforcement agencies and major businesses.*

*By publishing one of our lines as a novelty number to call for "fun," your disclosure is causing wasted time by our staff and costing not only their time, but also the long distance fees we pay while our lines are in use during your subscribers' games.*

*You are hereby given notice to cease and desist the publication of our business number, immediately remove it from bulletin board postings, and, in the bulletin board, publish the posting that an 800 number had been published by your service which demonstrates commercial caller identification service and is not to be called for entertainment or curiosity purposes and that such calls may create civil and/or criminal prosecution for interference with interstate telecommunications.*

*You are also hereby notified that all calls to this number are being identified and callers will be contacted regarding their abuse of this number, and your company will be invoiced for the call activity at a rate of \$1.00 per call. We hope in the future you will take more precautions when encouraging your readers to entertain themselves by disrupting business services.*

*Regards,  
Your tutor*

### **Table 3. Sample Feedback on Task 2**

*Dear Ida,*

*Please find attached feedback on your writing (Tugas 2). Pay special attention to those parts in red. Please check the mistakes (i.e., wrongly chosen words, inappropriate word choices for a formal situation, past tense) and revise them again.*

*Regards,  
Your tutor*

### **Table 4. Sample Feedback on Task 3**

*Dear Arifiyandi,*

*Please find attached feedback on your writing (Tugas 3). Comments on Tugas 1 & 2 are coming very soon. Pay special attention to the following language points (see those parts in red):*

- 1) incomplete sentences*
- 2) incorrect tenses*

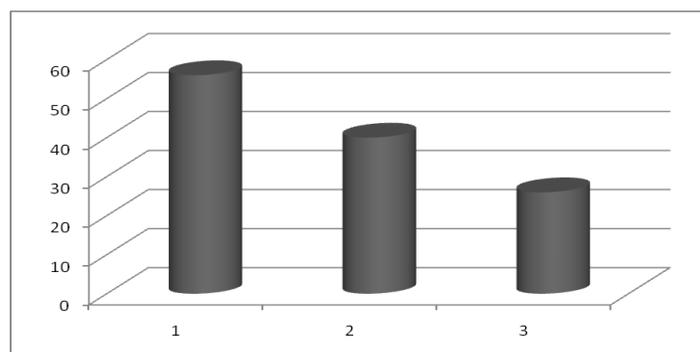
*Regards,  
Your tutor*

Plagiarism was occasionally committed by the students during the tutorial sessions, especially when it came to doing the written Tasks 1, 2 and 3. It is emphasised and highlighted in the course rubrics or instructions that the students are not allowed to copy-and-paste from the model writing or from other fellow students' work. They have to use their own words. Still, a few students attempted to copy their friends' work before submitting their essay online for marking. All they did was changing certain parts of the written work with own choice of words, while the rest are completely the same. In other words, plagiarism was noticeable. As their tutor, I listed all the letters (apart from essays) that are very similar to each other. When it was time to give feedback online, I mentioned this issue to the respective students to make them realise that their actions are ethically unacceptable. Therefore, their marks were penalised accordingly. Below are samples of the plagiarised works committed by two students in Task 2.

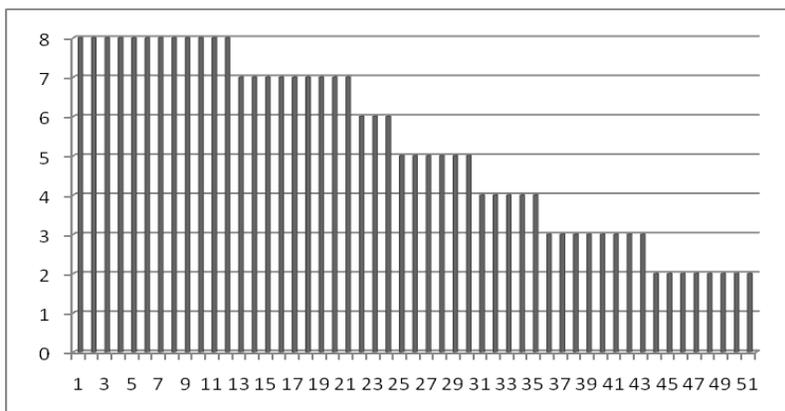
**Table 5. Samples of a Plagiarised Work**

<p><i>Dear Mr. Bichman:</i></p> <p><i>I apologize for the mix-up of order #: 26429782. We have just implemented a new packaging system that still has a few bugs to be worked out, but we did fix your order and sent it out this morning. For your trouble, we have enclosed a \$25 gift certificate which can be used at any of our stores. Once again I would like to apologize for the mix-up in your order and any inconveniences this may have caused you.</i></p> <p><i>Faithfully,</i> <i>Signature</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p><i>Dear Mr. Bicman</i></p> <p><i>I apologize for the mix – up of order # 26429782. For your trouble, we have enclosed a \$25 gift certificate which can be used at any of our stores. Once again I would like apologize for the mix – up in your order and inconveniences this may have caused you. We have just implemented a new packaging system that still has few bugs to be worked out, but we did fix your order and sent it out this morning.</i></p> <p><i>Faithfully</i> <i>Signature</i></p>
---

Marking the students' work, especially the three tasks given, was done based on the two marking criteria mentioned earlier – *task* and *language* (namely, range of sentences and selection of vocabulary). Figure 2 shows the trend of tasks completion. The number of students who managed to complete all the three tasks was lower as soon as the tutorial sessions came to an end (in particular, Task 1 = 54 participants; Task 2 = 42 participants; Task 3 = 37 participants). This showed that they might lack the motivation to take part even though participation in the online tutorial contributed thirty percent to their overall marks.

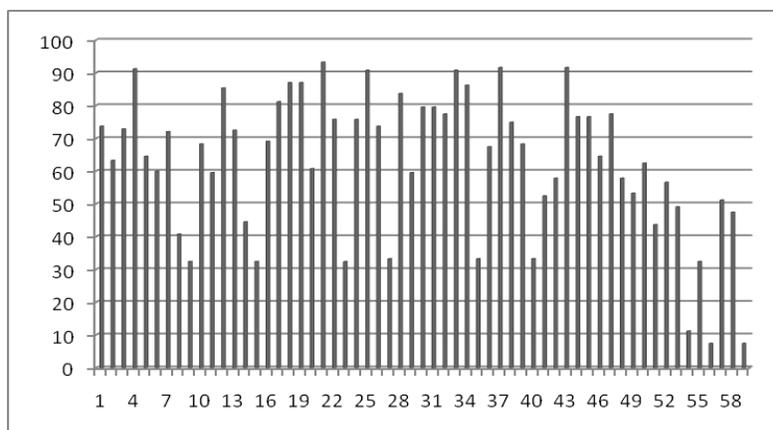
**Figure 2. Trend of Task Completion (Tasks 1-3)**

The same trend could also be seen in Figure 3 below. Only a few students were able to participate in the eight initiations, or in at least seven initiations. This finding shows that motivation is an important issue to the students. One alternative solution to this problem is to create a context for writing; this a context is important for them as it will motivate them to write (Vincent, 1990, pp. 272 – 278).



**Figure 3. Number of the Initiations Participated**

In general, Figure 4 represents the total scores achieved by the students at the end of tutorial sessions. The scores included the marks allocated to three tasks completed and participation in both initiations and in forums of discussion.

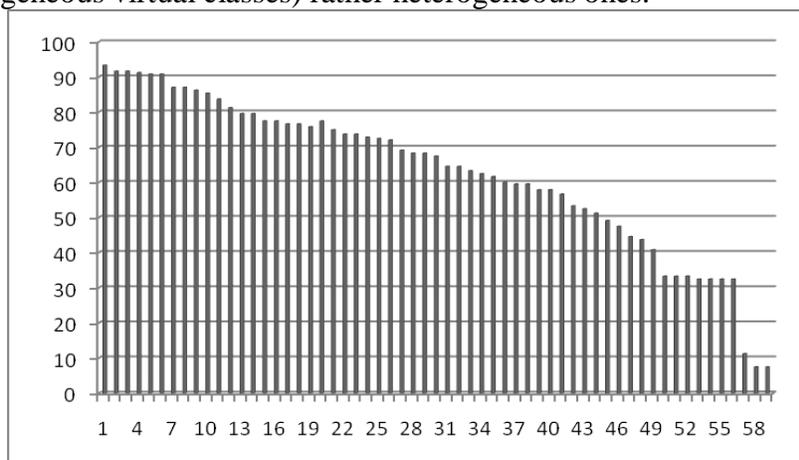


**Figure 4. Trend in the Total Raw Scores**

In general, the students’ performance in the Writing 4 course tutorial for the semester 2 registration period proves that they are still heterogeneous in terms of their level of language proficiency, which ranges from low intermediate to upper-intermediate/advanced level. This finding also partly indicates that they actually did not go through a stricter language skilled-based selection process starting from Writing 1 course up to Writing 4 course. If they have to take any kind of placement test before starting the programme, the students should have an average level of language proficiency.

Figure 5 shows an average raw score of 63, sorted from the highest (i.e., 93) to the lowest (i.e., 8). This trend indicates that nearly half of the marks awarded to the students are below the average. This means that the students do not actually have good writing skills, particularly those in the advanced level. If they have taken a kind of language-based admission test prior to their course, they should have been able to cope with more difficult writing tasks as the ones in Writing 4 course because they have obviously gone through a series of writing courses such as Writing 1 up to 3.

One of the negative “backwash effects” (Weir, 1990) of assessment on online learning at UT is that in general, language testing or marking language-oriented tutorial tasks in particular is not based on any “entry point”. As an open and distance learning institution, the University is in a dilemma in the sense that on the one hand, it has a motto which goes, “making higher education open to all” which gives more or wider educational access to the society; on the other hand, an undergraduate programme like the English-Indonesian-English translation programme needs to administer some sort of placement test so that all new students will start from a certain point (i.e., homogeneous virtual classes) rather heterogeneous ones.



**Figure 5. Trend of Sorted Total Raw Scores**

Whatever the admission test looks like or is constructed, this practice will not stop the university from recruiting new students. Therefore, an alternative “win-win” solution in this respect is to categorise new students based on their test scores into two different undergraduate programmes of studies — the General English programme with standard language proficiency requirements and an undergraduate programme in translation which requires stronger language background as practised in most universities nationwide and worldwide.

If this measure is not taken consideration, UT might experience the so-called lower *retention rate* in the future for that particular undergraduate translation programme even though there is an increasing trend in the students intake each year. This is because of the fact that most students do not acquire English language proficiency that is good enough to take up the study programmes at the University.

### Conclusion

This paper highlights relevant aspects of online tutorial package for an advanced writing course offered by distance higher educational institutions. Discussions cover some relevant issues such as the students' collaboration in the Forums of Discussion, tutor's feedback on students' writing and tutor's workload, as well as plagiarism and grading of students' work. To some extent, forums of discussion available on UT-Online tutorials have given both academic and social opportunities for the students to share their ideas and experiences through writing. Under the auspices of the tutor, their discussions should be more constructive.

Feedback on writing can in fact be given individually or collectively done online. Individual feedback could give more motivation to the students so that their writing confidence would increase. In addition, collective feedback given to a group of students who are discussing a given topic in the Forums of Discussion will enforce their understanding of the topic or particular language points.

However, a large virtual classroom comprising of hundred of registered students could be a heavy workload to the tutors when it comes to providing individual feedback on the writing exercises using the eight initiations for all the students. The workload would even get heavier when it is time to mark or grade the students' works on the basis of task-and-language criteria in dealing with the three main written tasks (i.e., Tasks 1–3) as part of the whole tutorial package. In other words, each of the two feedback types mentioned above has advantages and disadvantages.

To conclude, online advanced writing skills course tutorial in particular, and the online tutorials in general, need more serious efforts in upgrading the tutors' qualifications and their subject-matter knowledge, computer/technical skills, skills for designing online learning materials and tasks, as well as soft skills, as not all of these are practised in face-to-face classrooms.

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that further research involving data on the students' achievement in Writing 4 course – a comparison between their performance during the tutorial sessions and the performance in the end-semester assessments be carried out in the future.

A research that focuses on designing a model of language entry test for recruiting new students is also highly recommended. It is expected that the research findings will be useful for policy makers at UT and other institutions of distance higher education. As part of the stakeholders, it is crucial for the University to start administering a specially designed language entry test for two different study programmes – a programme of study in translation (a specialisation), which requires a high English language proficiency level, and a programme of study in General English, which is English language skills oriented.

### About the Author:

**KARNEDI** is a senior lecturer in translation courses by distance learning at the Indonesia Open University; he holds a PhD in Translation Studies; Master's Degree in Media Technology for TEFL from Newcastle University, UK; Bachelor's Degree in Linguistics from the University of Indonesia. Among his publications are: self-instructional course books on translation, English language skills, bilingual dictionaries, research papers published in international journals.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the International Symposium on Open, Distance, and E-learning (ISODEL) held in Bali, 4 – 6 December 2012.

**References**

- Byrne, D. (1988). *Teaching Writing Skills*. London: Longman.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Hockly, N. (2010). *Teaching Online 3: Online teacher skills*. Retrieved 8 November 2012, from [www.deltapublishing.co.uk/.../teaching-online-3-online-teacher-skills](http://www.deltapublishing.co.uk/.../teaching-online-3-online-teacher-skills).
- Hyland, K. (1990). Providing productive feedback. *ELT Journal*, 44(4), 279–285.
- Johnson, K. (1988). Mistake correction. *ELT Journal*, 42(2), 89–96.
- Karnedi. (2003). *Writing 4*. Jakarta: Indonesia Open University Press.
- Keh, C.L. (1990). Feedback in the writing process: A model and methods for implementation. *ELT Journal*, 44(4), 294–304.
- Travers, M. (2001). *Doing Qualitative Research Through Case Studies*. London: Sage.
- Weir, C. (1990). *Communicative Language Testing*. London: Prentice Hall International.
- Warnock, S. (2009). *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- White, R. (1987). *Writing Advanced*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vincent, S. (1990). Motivating the advanced learner in developing writing skills: a project. *ELT Journal*, 44(4), 272–278.
- Zuhairi, A. Adnan, I. & Thaib, D. (2007). Provision of student learning support services in a large-scale distance education system at Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE* 8(4), Article 4.