



The Alchemy of Virtual Tutoring: Tools, Opportunities, Challenges and Strategic Pathways

Imran Hussain^{*a}

a. Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Online or virtual mode of tutoring is a process which takes place between a learner and tutor by being away or without physical presence. It is carried out with the assistance of virtual, online or digital tools. During COVID-19 pandemic, a radical shift from conventional mode of instruction towards virtual or online mode took place due to social distancing. Primarily, it is operated through *Synchronous* and *Asynchronous* mode. Video and audio calling tools are a basic and primary source, while Zoom and Google Meet are the most widely used tools. Likewise, Interactive White-boards are also handy tools LMS and tutor management tools are also essential component in online or virtual tutoring. It enables interactive, immersive and engaging instruction. It promotes personalized and customised form of instruction. Furthermore, it is flexible, convenient, cost-effective and comfortable mode. Social isolation, drop out, lack of motivation, internet connectivity, and technical problems are the keys challenges of virtual or online tutoring. Strategies such as tutor connects strongly with the learners, visual contact through video calling, praise and appreciation, courtesy and empathy, customised tutoring, adopting flexible and practical approach, timely feedback and appreciating success can minimise these challenges and maximise the outcomes of virtual or online tutoring.

Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic changed the overall scenario of the world during 2019 and onward. Diverse fields of human activities responded to this outburst in their own way. Academic activities also went through a radical shift from conventional mode of instruction towards virtual or online mode because it was not possible for both learners and instructors to proceed with physical presence due to social distancing. Hence, physical classroom were replaced with virtual, online, e-learning, mobile and flip classroom in order to meet the instructional and tutoring needs of the learners (Almaiah et al., 2020). During that phase, the concept of online tutoring gained prominence, which is a way to utilize online tools or internet to interact with learners or tutor for the purpose to gain knowledge and instructional supports from tutors being away from each other physically (Martin et al., 2019).

Online tutoring gained momentum due to the reason that both learners and tutors can interact and negotiate with each other to enhance the learning manifolds and adding meanings to life during lockdown. Online tutoring is a part of broader spectrum

* Correspondence to: Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
E-mail address: imranhussain.uol@gmail.com (I. Hussain).



of instruction i.e. teaching and learning by virtue of online tools, technological gadgets and internet as a part of virtual knowledge sharing and learning experiences from various parts of globe. It is also known as distance or open tutoring, as it is carried out without physical presence of tutors and learners (Kim, 2020). Before the full swing of online tutoring, mentoring and tutoring was deemed to be more non-formal activity between a tutor and the learners but now it is being digitalized and held virtually which is now carried out through the assistance of digital and online tools.

These online tools include audio, video calls or tools and for that purpose the use of zoom, Google Meet, Ted-Ed, Blackboard, Moodle, We-Video, Outs and numerous other tools are frequently utilized to get online tutoring done in a fruitful way (Mishra et al., 2020). The use of digital tools and techniques assisted by technology has made the process of online tutoring smooth, easily accessed, low cost, flexible, effective and impactful. It is carried out beyond geographical boundaries and cultural barriers. It has reduced physical exertion and has enhanced the productivity of instruction manifolds. However, it is not free from challenges and limitations. Lack of physical presence has resulted in low confidence, low level socialization, deficient interpersonal skills and insufficient motivation among learners. Technical and ethical issues are also frequent in online mode of tutoring, as confirmed by studies such as Simamora (2020).

Types of Online Tutoring

Online or virtual mode of tutoring is a process which takes place between a learner and tutor by being away or without physical presence. It is carried out with the assistance of virtual, online or digital tools. With the advancement and digitalization of education and instruction, physical and conventional mode of tutoring has been replaced with digital or online tutoring as an essential component of instruction. This trend has gained prominence and online tutors are available around the globe to address the learners' needs for all subjects and grades. Online tutoring can be acted out by using audio, video, text or any other virtual mode. Online tutoring can be classified into two major types. One is called Synchronous mode of tutoring, in which the tutor and the learner have to be online at the same time to carry out the process of tutoring.

This type of tutoring is based on sharing of ideas and solving instructional problems of the students in real time just like in face to face tutoring but without physical presence. This is carried out with the use of technology to assist both the tutor and the learner to communicate and interact with each other directly. It also enabled both the stakeholders to get immediate response. The second is called Asynchronous tutoring, in which the online presence of tutor and learner is not essential at the same time. It can be carried out in a tutorial way and a tutor can assign tasks to the learner. The learner completes the task and submits online. The learner can seek any assistance through discussion forum or chat-box with the tutor. In this type of tutoring, there is no need for the tutor and the learner to be online at the same time to carry out the process of tutoring. It is a more flexible and convenient mode of tutoring, in which both tutor and learner can interact at the time of their availability and convenience.

Tools of Online Tutoring

As is stated above, online tutoring is a process that is carried out with the utilization of virtual or online tools. So, technological gadgets or tools are keys as far as online tutoring is concerned. There are numerous tools that enabled online tutoring to encompass amply. These tools are handy as far as the productivity of online tutoring in terms of engagement is concerned. Video and audio calling tools are a basic and primary source of online tutoring to get tutors and learners connected. Zoom and Google Meet are the most widely used tools of online tutoring for connection and interaction. These tools assist online tutoring to have interaction with bodily gestures and eye contact. These also let both tutor and learner to share screen to have study related materials shared with each other.

Interactive White-boards are also handy tools for online tutoring, as these assist the learners and tutors to utilize digital canvas to explain concepts and solve the problems of the learners in online tutoring. Interactive White-boards come up with built-in features like calculator and calculus which assist in solving mathematical problems. Such tools also have the facility of recording the session so that it may be revised by learners as per their needs. LMS and tutor management tools are also there for the tutors to track the progress of the students and to generate evaluation report to make the instructional process more fruitful and impactful as far as online tutoring is concerned. In addition, audio, video, image and text are the widely used form of data in online tutoring.

Advantages of Online Tutoring

The paradigm of instruction is shifting towards digitalization, in which tutors are delivering contents digitally and by making use of digital and online tools. Online tutoring has served the purpose of interactive, immersive and engaging instruction. It is established fact now that online tutoring has come up with numerous benefits. This form of tutoring is available to the learners round the clock. Instructional resources and assistance from a concerned tutor can be sought any time of day at one own convenience. This mode of tutoring has enabled the learners and tutors to go beyond the geographical boundaries and barriers

(Palvia et al., 2018). Moreover, online tutoring assists learners and tutor to get connected anytime from anywhere. Unlike conventional mode, in online tutoring, immediate help is provided to the learners by tutors. Online tutoring has given vent to personalized form of instruction. Tutors customize the lesson or mentoring, keeping in view the individual needs and aptitude of the learners.

Online tutoring enable the learners to have access to the recording sessions and can join the live session from anywhere by making use of digital platform of their choice. It assists the tutor to evaluate and keep track of the progress of the learners in a structured way. Online tutoring enables a wider and broader window for knowledge sharing and acquiring interpersonal skills. Another key benefit of online tutoring is that it saves time, energy and resources and can be carried out at flexible schedule as per the availability of both the tutor and the learners (Lau et al., 2020). Learners are also able to learn the effective use of time through time and study management technique. In addition, online tutoring is a convenient and comfortable mode which suits both the tutor and the learners. This flexibility and convenience makes the learners to enjoy their study instead of taking it as burden (Xu and Xu, 2019).

Accessibility for all people regardless of sex, age, colour, culture and context is perhaps one of the prime benefits of online tutoring. Online tutoring has even gone beyond the formal academic instruction to providing assistance in all walks of life through mentorship from a virtual tutor or guide from anywhere at any time. Online tutoring has enabled to empower the learners by improving their competency. Open-minded interaction and communication among tutor and the learner is possible in online tutoring. Choice of tutor is also available in online tutoring, which is not as much convenient in physical or face to face tutoring. In online tutoring, learners choose a tutor of their choice, keeping in view their interests' area. In addition, virtual platforms enable the learners to find a tutor of their choice more easily from a wide range of experts from the same field of expertise. Last but not the least, online tutoring is cost-effective as compare to in person tutoring, which makes it more appealing.

Challenges in Online Tutoring

Despite the above stated as well as numerous other benefits online tutoring is not as much simple and easy as it seems. Rather there are many challenges or limitations that are there in online tutoring. One of the key issue with online tutoring is that students or learners who have weak or poor schema they find it difficult to cope with this mode of tutoring where tutor has to keep a pace in terms of its tutoring persona. So, such learners find online tutoring a complete mess as they are not able to take full advantage of online tutoring (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). Issue of motivation also arise in online tutoring as those learners who are not very much enthralled towards learning feel it much difficult to keep pace with online instruction as it is completely different from conventional mode of instruction. Such situation leads towards social isolation which culminates towards drop out in online tutoring (Soffer & Cohen, 2019).

Another major challenge or limitation in online tutoring is with regard to the platform or internet connectivity issues. Technical problems are a major hurdle in maximum output of online tutoring. Online tutoring is wholly dependent on internet and other digital tools. Failure of either of these leads to issue or problem in online tutoring, and it minimizes the optimal outcomes of online tutoring (Lembani et al., 2020). There are other types of limitations in online tutoring which have been summed up by Sahito and Vaisanen (2017) as challenges with regard to "individual challenges, course challenges, teaching challenges, and cultural challenges that vary from country to country because of their different contexts and readiness." In addition, lack of IT expertise on the part of both tutor and learners is also a major hurdle in underdeveloped areas along with connectivity issue with regard to internet (Aung and Khaing, 2015).

In online tutoring there is a little exposure or the students' engagement that limits their instruction as it is very much essential part of academic activities. Students having already low level of motivation and engagement will not be able to achieve maximum results from online tutoring. At times, feedback is not provided timely, which also has adverse effects on tutoring process. Online tutoring also limits the physical contact that also has a hurdle in achieving optimal outcomes of online tutoring. Tutor students bond is not very intimate and close in online tutoring, which is a key in face to face tutoring and interaction. Equality of opportunities is also limited as far as the learners from far fetch and undeveloped regions are concerned, where there are issues of internet and availability of technological gadgets.

Strategies and Suggestions to Overcome Challenges

Above cited challenges and limitations can be addressed amply if a tutor connects strongly with the learners to keep them engaged and motivated. Establishing a visual contact through video calling can be yet another key strategy to keep the learners enthralled and engaged. Being modest and showing courtesy towards learners is also essential for effective online tutoring. Praise and appreciation is always a key to keep the students in track for instruction. Being passionate on the part of tutor is also an effective strategy for the success of online tutoring. Keeping students entertain has also fruitful impact on online

tutoring. Personalized and customized tutoring is also prime strategy to make online tutoring effective and fruitful. Paying personal attention also enhances the success rate in any form of tutoring. Adopting flexible and practical approach is also a key to get the learners motivated. Last but not the least, providing timely feedback and appreciating success on the part of tutors have impactful persona as far as online tutoring is concerned.

Conclusion

Online tutoring is a process of instruction carried through internet or digital tools in an online or virtual environment. It can be carried out either in Synchronous mode i.e. real time interaction among tutor and learner or in Asynchronous way i.e. when there is no real time interaction. In order to achieve the optimal results of online tutoring audio, video calling, LMS, interactive White-boards, chat box and file sharing are the most common tools that are utilized in online tutoring at large. Zoom and Google Meet are also common tools in online tutoring. Online tutoring has numerous benefits as it is easy, convenient, flexible, productive, interactive, cost-effective and adoptable. It promotes customized and personal tutoring. Interactive, live and recorded sessions also serve multiple benefits that are accessible in online tutoring. It enhances engagement, interests and ease of learning.

Knowledge sharing is broader and wider in online tutoring. However, it is not free from challenges and limitations. Technical and connectivity issue are very frequent in online mode of tutoring. Due to lack of physical presence, it causes distraction issues as well. Access to digital tools is also a barrier in online tutoring, especially in backward areas. Miscommunication, time zone difference, screen fatigue and security concerns are also among key challenges and limitations of online tutoring. Lack of motivation and socialization are also very challenging to handle in online tutoring. Interpersonal skills and hand on practice are also absent in online tutoring. Building trust, appreciative feedback, encouragements, creating visual contact, keeping learners entertain and personalized and customised strategies are effective to overcome the challenges in online tutoring to make the process more effective, fruitful and impactful.

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