

Challenges of Quality Tutoring in English Language Courses at Bangladesh Open University: A Study on Learners Perspective

Abu Nasar Mohammad Tofail Hossain *

Abstract

Bangladesh Open University is the stand-alone public university in Bangladesh that provides education among the learners through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. Modules written in self-learning method is provided among the learners and weekend supplementary tutorial classes are conducted at different tutorial centers throughout the country. The purpose of the present study was to find out the perceptions of the learners about the quality of the English language course tutoring and the challenges faced by the learners in the tutorial sessions. A mixed method research approach was used to have a complete and comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Qualitative data were collected through Key Informant Interview and Focus Group Discussion while a semi-structured survey questionnaire has been used for collecting quantitative data. The study revealed that the tutors were not careful enough to ensure quality tutorial sessions. Finally, the present study has some recommendations regarding the improvement of the tutoring qualities of the tutors throughout the country. The tutors should emphasis on more interaction among the learners, between the learners and the tutors focusing on the learners' centric classroom. Moreover, some outcome-based training and workshop could be arranged by BOU authority to expedite and ensure the quality of tutoring of the tutors.

Keywords: ODL, Quality Tutoring, English Language Modules, Perceptions, Challenges

Introduction

Bangladesh Open University delivers education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. Through ODL mode a tutor has to have some extra qualities than the traditional face to face classroom teaching system. Therefore, the Commonwealth of Learning (2003) suggests some attributes for a tutor in ODL mode. These attributes are: 1) provides clear explanations on his or her expectations and making style; 2) welcomes extra questions; 3) "locates one's faults but corrects them kindly" says a student, "and she explains why marks have been lost or awarded"; 4) makes thorough but cheerful and constructive comments (in contrast with another student's plaintive remark: "the comments left one feeling criticized, threatened and nervous"); 5) gives an extra boost to encourage a student in difficulties; 6) clarifies points which have not been easily grasped or correctly learned; 7) is helpful in achieving the student's objectives; 8) offers flexibility when it is needed; 9) shows a genuine interest in motivating learners (those who are beginners and so perhaps at a less interesting stage for the tutor); 10) write all corrections legibly and at a meaningful level of detail; and 11) above all returns assignments promptly. These attributes enhances the quality of a tutor in his/her tutoring. As the tutoring in ODL system is different from conventional classroom teaching then the effectiveness of the tutoring depends on the aforesaid qualities. English language course tutors should have the qualities when English language is taught in Bangladesh as an international

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language. There are only three face-to-face tutorials: an *introductory tutorial*, where the learners meet their tutor for guidance and support them through the whole course, a *mid-course tutorial*, where the learners usually consult with their tutor regarding problems they have come across while doing their assignments, and the *final tutorial*, where the learners' performance is evaluated orally by the tutor (Klimova & Poulova, 2011: 1484). The tutors in different English courses at BOU are found reluctant to follow the attributes suggested by Commonwealth of Learning (2003). The present study investigated the challenges faced by the tutors in the learners' perspective.

Justification of the study

In the tutorial sessions learners meet a teacher once every weekend to discuss and clarify problems they have identified in their real study time (Klimova & Poulova, 2011: 1484). The success of an educational program in ODL system depends largely on effective tutoring. English is regarded as a difficult course in the context of the learners of Bangladesh Open University as most of the learners are adults and they were dropped out from their regular study for several reasons. The modules are developed in self-learning systems so that the learners can easily grasp the contents by themselves. In self-learning modules learners' needs are prioritized to achieve the learning outcomes successfully. Keeping the learners needs in mind the modules are developed accordingly. But the importance of face-to-face weekend classroom instructions plays a crucial role to make the course easy and interesting among the learners. The tutors play a vital role to make the class and the course easy, understandable and effective to the learners. To make the course effective to the learners mostly depends on improving the quality of the assigned tutor of the course. Learners' needs or feedbacks are required to improve the qualities of a tutor effectively. Therefore, the present study is important to know the learners' suggestions or needs to improve the qualities of the tutors. To reduce the learners' dropout, effective tutoring, tutors quality and environment for learning are first and foremost issues. Effective distance learning depends on excellence of tutoring and quality self-learning modules as the learners are far from their direct teacher. Hence, the present study sheds lights on the perceptions and the challenges of the quality of English language tutoring of ODL learners with some recommendations.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to-

- find out the perceptions of the study population about existing quality of English language course tutors;
- explain the challenges faced by the learners on English language course tutoring;
- formulate some recommendations for future implication.

Research Questions:

- 1) What was the socio-economic status of the study population?
- 2) What were the perceptions of the study population about existing quality of English language course tutors?

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- 3) What were the challenges faced by the learners on tutoring of English language course?
- 4) What were the recommendations for improving the quality of the tutors?

Literature Review

Bangladesh Open University is the only established stand-alone ODL University in the country. Developed and developing countries are adopting ODL to meet the learners' needs of the 21st century. Challenges have been found to be situational, attitudinal, psychological and pedagogical (Berge et al., 2002); and institutional and socio-cultural related challenges (Zirnkle, 2001). The challenges are found at three levels: individual student, instructional and institutional. In this study investigation on challenges are faced by the learners at Bangladesh Open University. Bangladesh acknowledges the importance of ODL in bringing higher education to the disadvantaged groups of people of the society. In 1992 BOU was established through an act of parliament to provide distance education. ODL can effectively reach those learners who have been denied access to higher education, for example women who are unable to attend traditional education programmes because of household responsibilities or cultural constraints, economically marginalized groups, and the imprisoned (Rumble, 2000). Berge.et.al (2002) categorized challenges of distance learners as situational, epistemological, philosophical, pedagogical, technical, social and cultural based. Other challenges documented by Zirnkle(2001) are inadequate feedback and poor teacher contact, alienation and isolation, and poor student support services. Mossberger et al (2003) observe that technical competence needed in order to have effective access to contemporary ICT is a challenge to distance learners and tutors. Garland (2007) identifies some situational challenges like poor learning environment and lack of time for learners and tutors. Kember (1989) argues that poor time management by tutors leads to challenges such as learners' inability to integrate the demands of off campus study with family, work and social commitments. Same sorts of challenges are faced by the Bangladeshi ODL tutors and the learners. Challenges all those mentioned in the literature are based on different countries of the world. The study will investigate the challenges faced by the learners and tutors of BOU.

Theoretical Overview

The present study is guided by Bean & Metzner's (1985) Students Attrition Theory. Bean & Metzner's (1985) identified students' attrition into few categories where the ODL learners were included. The academic variables including study habits and course availability; backgrounds and defining variables such as age, educational goals, ethnicity, environmental variables such as finances, and hours of employment, family responsibilities, outside encouragement, academic and psychological outcomes while at their study. These variables of challenge push learners to drop-out by putting too much pressure on their time and resources.

Methodology

For collecting qualitative data, total of 12 KII (Key Informant Interview) and at least 6 FGD (Focus Group Discussion) have been conducted. A formulated checklist has been used for conducting FGD and on the other hand, another checklist has been used for conducting KII. A survey has been conducted on 200 learners for collecting

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quantitative data by using a semi structured survey questionnaire. This questionnaire has been developed by using 5 point Likert Scale where 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree and 5=strongly disagree. This study has been conducted on the learners of SSC, HSC, BA/BSS and B.Ed. programs of Bangladesh Open University of six different regional centers such as, Chittagong, Comilla, Jessore, Barisal, Sylhet and Rajshahi. Purposive sampling procedure has been followed for qualitative data collection while Random sampling has been followed for quantitative data collection. To determine the sample a sample size determination table has been used. Secondary data has been collected by reviewing related documents, books, research papers, articles, seminar findings, conference proceedings, and periodicals, leaflet, brochure, etc.

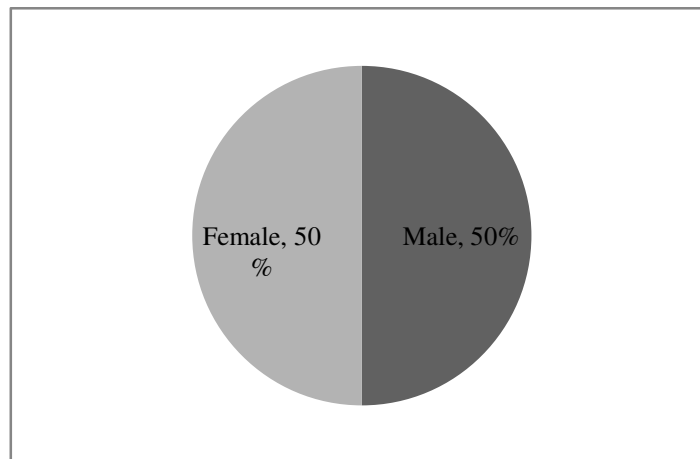
Findings and Analysis

Quantitative analysis

Socio-economic and demographic information

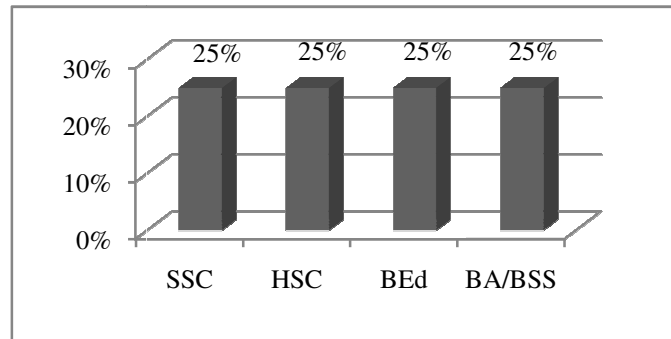
Among the respondents, 50 percent of them were male and another 50 percent were female. The age range was 20-55 years. Among them 51 percent of the respondents were unmarried, 39 percent married, 5 percent divorced, 3 percent single, and 2 percent widowed. Twenty percent respondents were enrolled into SSC, 25% were enrolled into HSC, 25% were enrolled into Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) program and 25% were enrolled into BA/BSS program. Among the respondents, 93 percent of belong Islam, 6 percent Hinduism, and 1 percent Christianity. The range of the respondents' family income was Tk. 8000-Tk. 35000. The respondents have a scattered occupational background. Some of them were school teacher, village doctor, big business, petty businessman, govt. service holder, housewife etc.

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of the respondents by sex



Source: Field Study, 2019

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of the respondents by program



Source: Field Study, 2019

Perception on quality of existing English language course tutors

The tutors placed greater emphasis on writing skills of the learners. The majority 55 percent (strongly agree & agree) of the respondents thought that the tutors placed the greater emphasis on the writing skills in the English tutorial sessions while many (25%, strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents said that the tutors did not place greater emphasis on writing skills. The mean value regarding this statement is 2.4500.

There was a fusion of responses about the tutor produced a more formal tone in the tutorial sessions which was accepted by 46 percent (strongly agree & agree) of the respondents whereas 32 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents rejected that the tutor produced a more formal tone. The result shows that the mean value is 2.7400 regarding this statement.

The respondents found that the tutors did not follow a linear conversation, but instead promotes multiple conversations which was recognized by 47.5 percent (strongly agree & agree) of the respondents whereas 33.5 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents discarded that tutor did not follow a linear conversation, instead of promoted multiple conversations. The result shows that mean value is 2.7350 regarding this statement.

The majority 63 percent (strongly agree & agree) of the respondents believed that the tutors confined learning to specific times. On the other hand, many (18.5%, strongly disagree & disagree) respondents mentioned that the tutors did not confine learning to specific times. Some of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinions. The result shows mean value is 2.2800 and regarding tutor did not confine learning to specific times.

The highest 43 percent (strongly agree & agree) of the respondents alleged that tutor placed greater emphasis on learners' learning. On the other hand, many (32%, strongly disagree & disagree) respondents thought that the tutors did not place greater emphasis on the learners' learning. Some (25%) of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinion. The mean value is 2.7750 regarding tutors placed greater emphasis on learners' learning.

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The highest 44 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents believed that the tutors did not require to develop new ways of encouraging participation. On the other hand, many (36%, strongly agree & agree) respondents believed that the tutors required to develop new ways of encouraging participation. Some (20%) of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinions. The mean value is 3.0800 regarding tutors recognition to develop new ways of encouraging participation.

The highest 43.5 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents stated that the tutors did not require to assess the worth of online contributions. On the other hand, many (39.5%, strongly agree & agree) respondents considered that the tutors required to assess the worth of online contributions. Some (17%) of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinions. The mean value is 3.0100 regarding tutors requisition to assess the worth of online contributions.

Tutors did not organize, deliver and evaluate tutorials. Most (43%, strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents said that the tutor did not organize, deliver and evaluate tutorials whereas many (38%, strongly agree & agree) said that the tutors organized, delivered and evaluated tutorials and another 19 percent of the respondents were neutral in putting their responses. The mean value is 3.0200 regarding this issue.

A combination of responses was found about that the tutor provided learning with explicit and clear instructions in a study guide which was differed by 41.5 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents but 39.5 percent (strongly agree & agree) of the respondents opined that tutor provided learning with explicit and clear instructions in a study guide. Another 19 percent of the respondents were neutral in putting their opinions. The result shows that mean value is 3.0000 regarding this statement.

The majority (66.5%, strongly agree & agree) of the respondents believed that tutor helped the learners to overcome obstacles to achieve their learning objectives whereas 22 percent of the respondents argued that tutor did not help learners to overcome obstacles to achieve their learning objectives. The result shows that mean value is 2.2100 regarding this statement.

The highest 44 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents considered that tutor did not make correction, evaluate and deliver feedback on the learners' individual assignments and did not return to the learners. On the other hand, many (36.5%, strongly agree & agree) respondents considered that tutor made the correction, evaluate and deliver feedback on the learners' individual assignments and returned to the learners. Some (19.5%) of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinion. The mean value is 3.0700 regarding this issue.

The data depicts that the majority (68.5%, strongly agree & agree) of the respondents mentioned that the tutor resolved potential study conflicts. On the other hand, many (20%, strongly disagree & disagree) respondents mentioned that the tutor did not resolve potential study conflicts. Some (15.5%) of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinions. The mean value is 2.2900 regarding this issue.

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The majority (61%, strongly agree & agree) of the respondents believed that the tutor supported and encouraged the learners in their studies by e-mail and discussions. On the other hand, many (21%, strongly disagree & disagree) respondents believed that the tutor did not support and encourage the learners in their studies by e-mail and discussion. Some (18%) of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinions. The mean value is 2.3050 regarding this issue.

The majority (59%, strongly agree & agree) of the respondents believed that tutor reacted to enquiries and gave advice. On the other hand, many (21%, strongly disagree & disagree) respondents believed that tutor did not react to enquiries and did not give advice. Some (20%) of the respondents were neutral in giving their opinion. The mean value is 2.3400 regarding this issue.

A mishmash of responses was found about that sometimes tutor created the content of the learning course, which makes them responsible for its quality which was differed by 44.5 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents but 33 percent (strongly agree & agree) of the respondents believed that that sometimes tutor created the content of the learning course, which makes them responsible for its quality. Another 22.5 percent of the respondents were neutral in putting their opinion. The result shows mean value is 3.1600 regarding this statement.

(See the Table 1.)

Table 1: Learners' perception on existing quality of English language course tutors

Statements	Mean
Respondents' perception on tutor's emphasis on writing skills	2.4500
Respondents' perception on tutor's formal tone	2.7400
Respondents' perception on tutor's conversation	2.7350
Respondents' perception on tutor's specific times confines learning	2.2800
Respondents' perception on tutor's emphasis on learners' learning	2.7750
Respondents' perception on tutor's requisition to develop new ways of encouraging participation	3.0800
Respondents' perception on tutors requisition to assess the worth of online contributions	3.0100
Respondents' perception on tutor organizes, delivers and evaluates tutorials	3.0200
Respondents' perception on tutors' providing learning with explicit and clear instructions in a study guide	3.0000
Respondents' perception on the helps of tutor to learners to overcome obstacles so that they achieve their learning objectives	2.2100
Respondents' perception on tutor correction, evaluation and delivering feedback on the learners' individual assignments and returning them	3.0700
Respondents' perception on tutor resolving potential study conflicts	2.2900
Respondents' perception on tutor supporting and encourages the learners in their studies by e-mail and discussion	2.3050
Respondents' perception on tutor's reaction to enquiries and giving advice	2.3400
Respondents' perception on tutor's creation of the content of the learning course, which makes them responsible for its quality	3.1600

Source: Field Study, 2019

Challenges of tutoring in English language course

The lack of motivation of the tutor was found as a challenge which was faced by the majority (83.5%, strongly agree & agree) of the respondents and some (10%, strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents did not find the challenge in the tutorial session. Among the respondents, 6.5 percent were neutral in giving their view. The result shows that the mean value is 1.7850 regarding this issue.

The data shows that stress and anxiety of the tutor was found as a challenge of quality tutoring which was faced by the majority (80.5%, strongly agree & agree) of the respondents and some (12%, strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents did not find it in the tutorial session. Among the respondents, 7.5 percent were neutral in giving their view. The result shows that the mean value is 1.8750 regarding this issue.

The highest (39%, strongly disagree & disagree) of number of the respondents mentioned that bad behavior of the tutor in tutorial session was found as the challenge for quality tutoring whereas 31 percent (strongly agree & agree) of them said that bad behavior of the tutor in tutorial session was not found as the challenge for quality tutoring. Many (30%) of the respondents were neutral in putting their opinion regarding this issue. The result shows that the mean value is 3.1100 regarding this issue.

The highest (46%, strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents remarked that laziness of tutor was not found as the challenge for quality tutoring whereas 27.5 percent (strongly agree & agree) of them opined that laziness of tutor was found as the challenge for quality tutoring. Many (26.5%) of the respondents were neutral in putting their opinion regarding this issue. The result shows that the mean value is 3.3100 regarding this issue.

The mean value of 1.8050 indicates that lack in acquiring new knowledge of the tutor was a challenge for quality tutoring for English language course which supported by the majority (83.5%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents.

The mean value of 2.0400 indicates that pressuring the learners by tutor was a challenge for quality tutoring for English language course which was mentioned by the majority (74.5%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents.

The mean value of 1.9100 points out that there was disinterest of tutor in tutorial session which was identified as a challenge for quality tutoring for English language course that was stated by the majority (78% strongly agree and agree) of the respondents.

The data highlights that the mean value of 1.9250 points out that inattention in solving problem of tutor in tutorial session which was identified as a challenge for quality tutoring for English language course that was said by the majority (78.5%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents.

Little discussion in tutorial session was a challenge for quality tutoring for English language course means which was accepted by the majority (80% strongly agree and agree) of the respondents. The mean value is 1.8850 regarding this issue.

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The majority (77%, strongly agree & agree) of the respondents believed that tutor made vague general comments on assignments. But 12.5 percent (strongly disagree & disagree) of the respondents argued that tutor did not make vague general comments on assignments and 10.5 of the respondents were neutral in putting their comment (mean=1.9250).

The highest 27 percent of the respondents was neutral to give the opinion to the statement "Tutor has no subject matter expertise". But 47 percent of the respondents rejected that tutor had no subject matter expertise. On the other hand, 25 percent of the respondents accepted that tutor had no subject matter expertise (mean=3.3500).

The majority (77%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents mentioned that tutor did not facilitate the learners to communicate between all learners in the tutorials sessions which was a challenge for quality tutoring. The mean value is 1.9950.

The majority (77%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents stated that tutor did not give the material to the learners, such as a dialog, text or grammar which was a challenge for quality tutoring. The mean value is 2.1100.

"Tutor does not create friendly and comfortable social environments in which students feel that learning is possible" was identified as a challenge by the majority (79%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents whereas the mean value is 1.8550.

The majority (74%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents stated that tutor did not make tasks, quizzes or assignments which was a challenge for quality tutoring. On the other hand, 10.5 percent (strongly disagree and disagree) of the respondents mentioned it was not a challenge. Among the respondents, 15.5 percent were neutral in putting their opinion. The mean value is 1.9400.

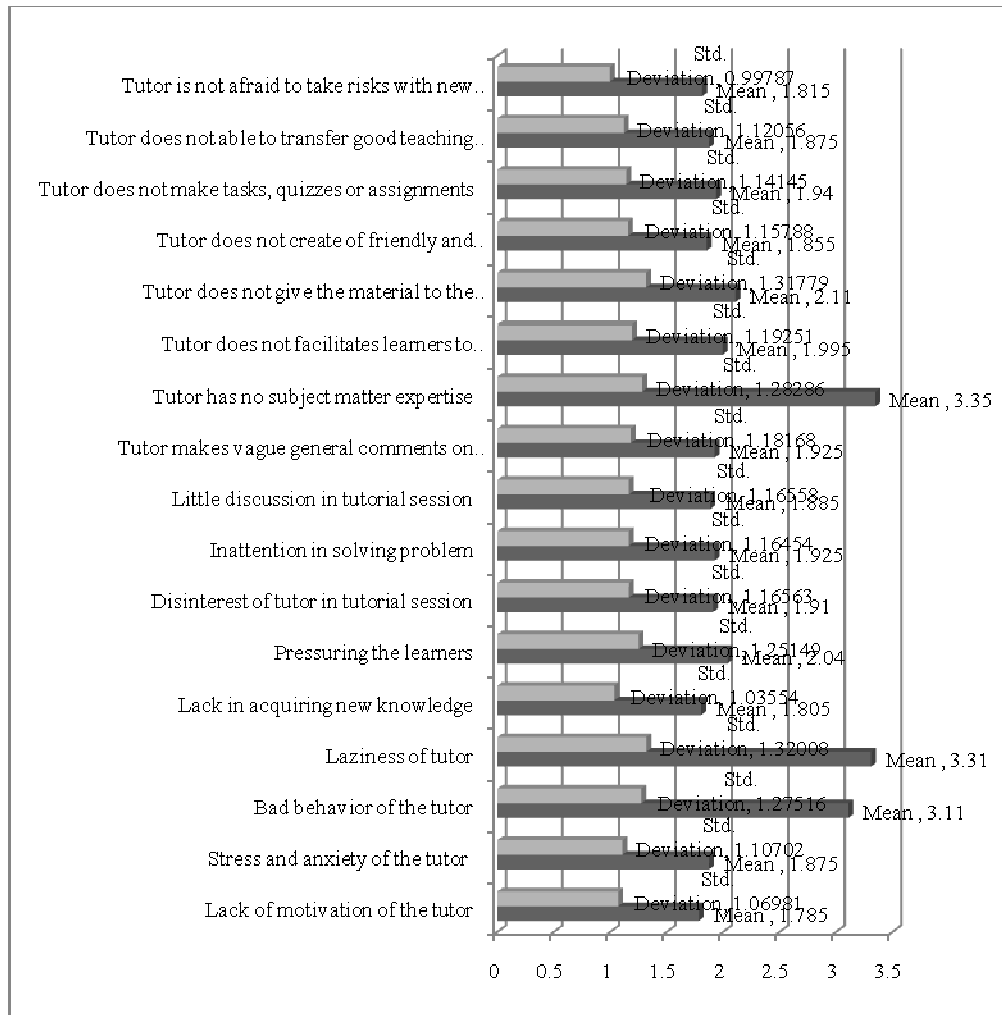
The majority (81.5%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents stated that tutor did not able to transfer good teaching skills into online contexts and it was a challenge for quality tutoring. On the other hand, 11 percent (strongly disagree and disagree) of the respondents mentioned that it was a challenge. Among the respondents, 7.5 percent were neutral in putting their opinion. The mean value is 1.8750.

The majority (83%, strongly agree and agree) of the respondents argued that tutor was not afraid to take risks with new technologies. On the other hand, 8 percent (strongly disagree and disagree) of the respondents mentioned that tutor was afraid to take risks with new technologies. Among the respondents, 9 percent were neutral in putting their opinion. The mean value is 1.8150.

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See the Figure 3.

Figure 3: Challenges of tutoring of English language course



Source: Field Study, 2019

Qualitative analysis

Summary from FGDs and KIIs

1. Perception on existing quality of English language course tutors

- a) Tutors produced more formal tone in the tutorial sessions;
- b) Tutors did not follow a linear conversation, but instead promotes multiple conversations;

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- c) Tutors did not encourage participation and to assess the worth of online contributions;
- d) Tutors provided learners with explicit and clear instructions and a study guide;
- e) Tutors did not make correction, evaluate and deliver feedback on the learners' individual assignments,
- f) Tutors helped the learners to overcome obstacles, resolve potential study conflicts, supports and encourages the learners in their studies by e-mail and discussions.

2. Challenges of tutoring of English language courses

- a) Lack of motivation among the tutors;
- b) Bad behavior and laziness of the tutors;
- c) Lack of curiosity to acquire new knowledge among the tutors;
- d) Tutors were inattentive in solving problems;
- e) Tutors did not encourage the learners to communicate among themselves in the tutorial sessions;
- f) Tutors were failed to create friendly and comfortable social environments;
- g) Tutors were unable to transfer quality teaching skills into online contexts.

Discussion

Learners' perception on the quality of existing tutoring in English language courses was good in some categories. Some of the tutors produced more formal tone in the tutorial sessions and some of them did not do it. In some study centers the tutors did not follow a linear conversation rather promoted multiple conversations while in some study centers. The learners believed that most of tutors did not confine learning to specific times. The tutors did not discover new avenues of encouraging participation and to assess the worth of online contributions. Moreover, they did not organize, deliver and evaluate tutorials. In tutorial sessions of some study centers the tutors provided learning with explicit and clear instructions in a study guide. The tutors helped the learners to overcome obstacles so that they could achieve their learning objectives and resolve potential study conflicts, supports and encourages the learners in their studies through e-mail and discussion and react to enquiries and give advice in tutorial sessions. In many cases the tutors did not provide feedback on learners' individual performance.

The study found that the learners faced some challenges of English language course tutoring. Such as, lack of motivation of the tutors, stress and anxiety from the tutors side, rude behavior and laziness of tutors in tutorial sessions in some study centers, lack in acquiring new knowledge of the tutors, pressuring the learners, lack of interest among the tutors in tutorial sessions, lack of interest in solving problems by the tutors in the tutorial sessions, less discussion in tutorial sessions, tutors made vague comments on assignments, lack of subject matter expertise in some of the tutors, tutors did not facilitate the learners to communicate among the learners in the tutorial sessions, tutors did not provide materials to the learners, such as a dialog, text or grammar, they did not create friendly and comfortable social environments,

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tutors did not conduct quizzes or assignments, and tutors were unable to transfer quality teaching methods and approaches into online contexts. But the tutor was curious to adapt with new technologies. The COL prescribed attributes of quality tutoring were partially followed by the tutors of English language courses at Bangladesh Open University.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The quality of distance education largely depends on the quality of tutoring. Quality tutoring ensures effective education. The present study reveals that the tutors partially followed the attributes in the tutorial sessions which are necessary for quality tutoring of English language courses. For example, tutors did not confine learning to specific times, did not organize, deliver and evaluate tutorials, rarely provided learners with explicit and clear instructions, and did not provide feedback on the learners' individual assignments. In this case the learners of Bangladesh Open University found lack of motivation of the tutors, stress and anxiety of the tutors, unfriendly behavior and laziness of tutors in the tutorial sessions in some study centers, lack of curiosity in acquiring new knowledge of the tutors, lack of interest in conducting tutorial sessions, less concentration in solving problems in the tutorial sessions, little discussion in tutorial sessions, making vague comments on assignments, failure to create friendly and comfortable social learning environment, tutors were unable to apply proper teaching approaches as the challenges for quality tutoring in English language courses. Finally, the study recommends the following issues to ensure quality tutoring in English language courses at Bangladesh Open University:

- Raising interaction among the learners, learners and tutor, BOU and tutors,
- Formulating policy and arranging some outcome-based training and workshop for enhancing tutorial skill development for the tutors; and
- Raising consciousness among the tutors about their responsibilities.
- Arranging some practice teaching or simulations for the tutors to make them clear about the underlying principles of ODL
- BOU should regularly arrange training on ICT.

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