



Adequate Organisation of Tutoring Sessions as an Effective Tool for Student Support in Open and Distance Learning: The Experience of the Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study attempted to examine students' opinions on the practices of different tutoring modes available at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). The necessity of this study was based on the ground that adequate organisation and management of tutoring sessions in ODL settings, determines the degree of support services provided to students. Four variables that in the study's case were coined as 'tutoring modes', were involved, which included orientation, face-to-face, online facilitation and tutor's written comments on students written assignments. The study was guided by social constructivist theory (SCT); whereby convergent mixed methods design, which allows simultaneous data collection, analysis and interpretation was adopted. Data were collected from 270 undergraduate students from eight selected regional centres of OUT and one personnel from Deputy Vice-Chancellor-Regional Services and Learning Technologies (DVC-RS-LT) office through questionnaire, focus group discussion and individual interview. The findings revealed that the management and organisation of tutoring support sessions faced some challenges; and hence, these challenges led to ineffectiveness in their ability to assist students to learn. It was recommended that the arrangements and organisation of the tutoring sessions needed some realisation so as to help students to have smooth transition and adjustments into the learning process. The study suggests that tutoring services provided through a variety of tutoring modes at OUT need to be well-planned, well-organised and well-managed to enable these tutoring modes to meet the expectations of students.*

Keywords: *Tutoring, Tutoring Support, Tutoring modes, open and Distance Learning*

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1. Introduction

Adequate organisation and management of tutoring support provided to students in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) settings is imperative. This has been grounded on the fact that proper organisation of tutoring support determines the quality of the services provided, and hence, addressing a number of challenges that students are facing. Literature affirms that the nature of the environment in which students in ODL setting are studying, requires provision of tutoring support which is adequately realised; as the environment itself is faced by a number of challenges (Ilonga, Ashipala & Tomas, 2020; Kara et al, 2019; Musingafi et al, 2013); and hence provision of tutoring support tends to address these challenges.

Literature affirms that it very hard to conceptualise the term ‘tutoring’ as it is used differently, in different educational levels and contexts. However, according to Topping (2000), tutoring is conceptualised as people who are not professional teachers helping and supporting the learning of others in an interactive, purposeful and systematic way. To him, this process can be done on a one-to-one basis, or in a pair, involving people like parents or other adult careers, brothers and sisters, other members of the family, other learners from the peer group, and various kinds of volunteers as tutors. On the other hand Vance (2016) asserted that tutoring involves the practice of assisting students in developing soft skills necessary for the preparation for college-level activities such as examinations, time management, and organisation. Generally, tutoring is one of the aspects of student support services designed to assist students who need extra help with their

studies. In ODL context, tutoring entails the act of providing variety of academic assistance and other support to learners studying in ODL setting so as to bridge the ‘gap’ that is likely to encounter them in their learning environment. Moreover, the term is used to describe the assistance provided to students in ODL institutions to help them develop study and survival skills that are necessary for their academic achievement (Tait, 1995; 2003; O’Rourke, 2003).

2. Literature Review

This section presents a critical review of literature that is in line with the role of adequate organisation of tutoring support for effective students support in open and distance learning context. The section has been arranged into several sub-themes.

2.1 Necessity of Tutoring Support in Open and Distance Learning

The nature of the learning environment in ODL context creates the necessity for tutoring provisions for students studying in that system. Studies indicate that students studying in ODL are physically separated in time and/or space from their tutors, peers and the institutions in general; and this separation tends to create a ‘transactional gap’ among students (Moore, 1994; Tait, 1995; Dzakiria et al, 2013). Moreover, most of the learners studying in ODL settings are adults with multiple roles, commitments and responsibilities as manifested by their diversified profile in terms of age, educational background, economic status and work experiences. Inevitably, they found it

increasingly hard for them to accommodate their roles, commitments and responsibilities with their learning schedules and activities (Al-Oraini & Kaur, 2007; Dzakiria et al., 2013; O'Rourke, 2003). Furthermore, most of the ODL students have limited experience with studying in ODL context because the learning mode is a complete new system to them (Al-Oraini & Kaur, 2007; Ntuli, 2016). All these result in students' sense of isolation and boredom, discouragement, limited interactions, and lack of collective affiliation and collegiality. These implications, in turn, lead to students' dropping out, attrition, late completion and low graduation rate (Moore, 1994; O'Rourke, 2003; Tait, 2003). These challenges tend to necessitate the need for students' academic assistance, which is normally provided in terms of tutoring provisions.

2.1.1 The Role of Tutoring Support in Addressing the Learning Challenges

The need to support learners in their learning in ODL context seems to be a global and regional agenda. For instance, a survey report on ODL policies and practices in Sub-Saharan Africa, focused on the need for ODL institutions to support students by assisting them to be able to cope and have smooth transition with their learning (ADEA, 2002; Modesto, 2011). According to Vance (2016), tutoring activities range from mere students' advising, guidance and counseling, to a number of other academic activities such as remedial courses, developmental courses with structured learning support, first-year programming, freshmen seminar courses, career and majors counseling, as well as enhancement of the development of study skills such as time management, organisational skills, note-taking skills, reading skills, to mention just a few, that are essential to students' learning (Al-Oraini & Kaur, 2007; Jelfs, Nathan & Barrett, 2006; Naqvi et al., 2018). According to Tinto (2012), tutoring has

a positive impact on grade-point-averages and strengthening soft skills, which tend to engage students more with the content, as well as addressing areas of weaknesses. According to Chikoko and Chiome (2013), provision of tutoring support to students tends to bridge the 'transactional distance' that students in ODL settings experience (also see Dzakiria et al., 2013; Moore, 1994; Tait, 2003). Furthermore, advocates of tutoring support assert that the support that is provided to students in ODL settings tend to enhance interaction and interactivity between tutors and students, as well as promoting interpersonal relationships among students; hence, assisting students to smoothly adapt and adjust into university studies (Dzakiria et al., 2013; Lukkarinen & Koivukangas, 2018; Tait, 1995). In support of that Dzakiria et al (2013) and Naqvi et al (2018) claim that tutoring support tends to create warmth and a supportive learning environment, which enables students to learn comfortably; making the learning environment interesting and enjoyable to the learners. This in turn, enables students to become self-directed, independent, and autonomous in addition to, ultimately, assuming responsibility for their own learning.

2.1.2 Organisation and Management of Tutoring Support in ODL Context

Literature affirms that there are different ways adopted over time by different educational institutions to enhance the provision of tutoring support to students; for the sake of this study, the researcher has coined these forms as 'tutoring modes'. The commonly practiced tutoring modes in ODL settings include, orientation sessions, online facilitation sessions, face-to-face sessions, tutors' written comments on students' assignments, as well as occasional and evening tutoring sessions (Akhter & Munshi, 2013; Dennis & Dees, 2015; Leibold & Schwarz, 2015; Lipe & Waller, 2013). The tutoring provisions are normally being

organised in different tutoring sessions, depending on the institutions' arrangements. In order for these tutoring sessions to bring forth effective results, they ought to be adequately organised; as the organisation and management of tutoring supports tend to affect the success of students in distance learning (Akhter & Munshi, 2013; Ogina and Mampane, 2015; Schofield and Sackville, 2010).

Literature tends to associate good organisation and arrangements of the services provided with their effectiveness of the services; which tend to be manifested in a number of aspects. For instance, Chikoko & Chiome (2013) considered the effectiveness and quality of the tutorial services as a result of the arrangements of the support services provided in terms face-to-face sessions. The aspects which were involved included follow-up on the students' attendance to tutoring sessions; duration of the tutoring session; the package of the tutorials; tutors' skills and experiences in handling students issues; as well as tutors' punctuality and presence in the tutoring sessions. On the other hand, a study by Nsamba & Makoe (2017) affirms that to attain adequacy in the tutoring support provided in ODL institution, six aspects were considered necessary; they include, tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, delivery, assurance of the services, as well as students' participation. They confirmed that adequate tutoring support was supposed to be organised in such a way that they to meet or exceed students' needs and expectations.

Moreover a study conducted by Chirume & Dick (2016) suggested that the adequate organisation and arrangement of tutoring support offered during orientation sessions tend to lessen some of the challenges associated with the separation of the learner and tutors. They affirmed that the sessions needed to be well-arranged in terms of adequacy of the venue, timing, public address system, orientation packages, time management and communication, coverage of aspects, as well as

proper use of media and technology. They added that practitioners needed to ensure that good organisation and management of tutoring support sessions were realised. This was also supported by Akhter & Munshi (2013), whose concerns was on the planning and arrangement of face-to-face tutoring sessions; particularly tutoring of course contents, as well as tutors' expertise and follow-up of students' attendances during the sessions. The result indicated that the sessions were unable to help learners be able to teach the tutored contents in accordance to the theme of distance education and become experts in distance teaching especially in rural areas of the country. Chokwe (2015), on the other hand claimed that when tutors' feedback to students' written assignments are insufficient, it tends to deny students' opportunities to learn effectively out of what they have laboured for, as they would not know their weak and strong points. Maboe, Nkosi and Makoe (2013), claimed that although online discussions seem to be vital in helping students to navigate and learn in ODL settings, poor organisation and handling of students and learning systems affected their usefulness. A number of challenges such as delay in getting study material, delay or no response from the lecturers, assignment answers incorrect and no connection from venues of video conference were noted.

The researcher noted on necessity adequate organisation of the tutoring support to assist students smooth learning environment at OUT, as its students tend to face similar learning challenges like any other ODL institutions in the globe (Bitegeko & Swai, 2012; Lukwekwe, 2015; Rwejuna, 2013). Since there was limited literature know at OUT on this topic, this study, therefore, intended to examine the students' opinions on the practices and organisation of different tutoring modes available at OUT as an effective means for adequate tutoring support provided to them.

3. Methodology

This study adopted the social constructivist theory (SCT) as a theoretical framework to guide the study. The theory's emphasis was on the power of social and cultural interactions in helping learners to construct knowledge. The theory was considered relevant to the current study because its main focus is the context in which learning takes place, which is also the central focus of the current study that in order for meaningful learning to take place the context in which learning is carried out is necessary. The study also adopted the anti-positivist paradigm, as anti-positivists believe that reality is relative; it depends on the position one stands when viewing at that reality (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Moreover, the study adopted convergent mixed methods design, as it allows both quantitative and T

4. Results and Discussion

As identified earlier, this study involved examining the tutoring practices of four tutoring modes commonly practiced in ODL

institutions, OUT in particular, namely, orientation, face-to-face, online and tutors' written comments on students' assignments. The results and discussion of the findings have been organised under respective sub-sections.

4.1 Orientation tutoring mode practices

Orientation tutoring is one of the most common tutoring modes in ODL institutions worldwide, and OUT in particular; and it tends to be organised in orientation sessions. The aim of these sessions is to help students get acquainted with the new learning environment to make them self-directed, independent and active participants in their own learning. To address the question on how the tutoring support was conducted during orientation sessions at OUT, the study assessed the planning and management of these sessions, in relation to their capacity to provide necessary support required by the students. Data were gathered using questionnaires and focus group discussions; and the results have been provided.

Table 1: Students' views on the orientation tutoring mode practices

Items on Orientation Tutoring Practices	Min	Max	Mean	STD
Follow-up on students' attendance to orientation sessions	1	5	1.85	.871
Specific document to guide orientation tutoring process	1	5	1.75	.788
Balance between academic and administrative activities	1	4	1.62	.780
Important guidelines for Students' studies during orientation	1	5	3.65	1.179
Chance to meet course tutors during orientation	1	5	2.19	1.265

From table 1, the lowest mean score in this variable indicated that students were dissatisfied with the balancing between academic and administrative activities carried out during the tutoring sessions. On the other hand, students seemed to agree with the item that during orientation tutoring sessions, students are provided with important administrative guidelines to acquaint them with

how to study in their new learning environment. The findings have also been supported by the results from focus group discussion whereby students voiced their dissatisfaction on the organisation and management of these sessions. During the focus group discussion (FGD) organised at Kinondoni RC, one respondent who focused on the imbalance between academic and

administrative activities carried out during tutoring sessions said:

Orientation sessions are normally organised for two days only. We spend the whole of the first day in registration and listening to different orientation speeches; and in most cases, these speeches contain information on the rules and regulations, fee payments, courses to take, how to study in ODL system, and the like; with limited room for study skills development.

Moreover, emphasising on the similar issue, another respondent from Katavi RC had similar complaints concerning effective utilisation of time during orientation sessions:

During orientation session, we do not get sufficient time on issues which assist us to survive in ODL. We spend insufficient time on how to navigate on Moodle platform; as most of the time is spent on such issues as course units, courses to take and other administrative issues ... thus, to me, the sessions are not sufficiently helpful to make me study comfortably.

From the findings, one can argue that it is hard for OUT practitioners to ensure the realisation of a favourable learning environment. These findings might have been contributed by limited time allocated for orientation tutoring sessions. That is, a two-day orientation session set by the University for orientation tutoring is

too insufficient for the institution to convey all the necessary information and guidance, particularly academic guidance, to help students make necessary adjustments in the new learning environment.

These findings are contrary to the observation reported by Chirume and Dick (2018), who contended that, although a few students complained about poor time management during these tutoring sessions, most of them were satisfied with the quality of tutoring services provided through orientation tutoring sessions. Similarly, Awang and Sinnadurai (2011) asserted that the duration of time allocated for any training has direct bearing on the quality of training attained. These observations on the imbalance of activities carried out during the orientation tutoring session also contrasts with the central idea of the conceptual framework, that proper organisation and management of the tutoring activities during tutoring sessions is necessary for students' transition in the learning context

4.2 Online tutoring mode practices

Another issue of concern for this study was assessing the tutoring practices of online tutoring at OUT. The focus was on exploring the context in which online tutoring was practised. The questionnaire with six items, and focus group discussion was employed in collecting data. Data for this aspect were also subjected to descriptive analysis, whereby the mean and standard deviation were computed. The findings have been depicted in Table 2; and supporting descriptive words from focus group discussion.

Table 2: Students' opinion on the online tutoring mode practice at OUT

Items on Online Tutoring	N	Min	Max	Mean	STD
Adequate feedback received from online tutors	270	1	4	1.68	.729
Guiding questions in online tutoring promote critical thinking	270	1	5	1.97	1.005
Tutors regularly present online discussions	270	1	4	1.77	.903
online discussions promoting learner self-reflection	270	1	5	2.59	1.177
Stability of network connectivity	270	1	5	1.78	.717
Students' technical skills	270	1	5	2.11	1.085

As table 1 illustrates, the respondents were not comfortable with the whole process of online tutoring, with the lowest mean observed in inadequate feedback received from tutors in online tutoring. Moreover, the study findings indicate that respondents were undecided on whether online discussions helped students to become self-reflective learners. Moreover, from the focus group discussion, it emerged that students were unhappy with the practices related to online tutoring. Students indicated that there were tremendous delays in the tutors' responses to students' queries and concerns posted on the Moodle platform. They mentioned that, sometimes, they asked questions which needed descriptions on the Moodle activities, but they hardly received timely feedback. Also, they reported that it took weeks before the tutor responded to students' queries. Students also complained that even when they received responses from tutors, the comments were too insufficient to help them to understand what they were supposed to do. For instance, one student from Iringa RC said:

I think there is little understanding of the proper use of the Moodle platform in terms of interaction and interactivity. ...You find that when you encounter any challenge, you write to the tutor asking for help; however, you can wait up to 10 days without any response. ...You get stranded as you do

not know how to go about studying the material. Consequently, you find yourself failing to get proper connections in your learning.

Another student from Katavi RC also complained about the unreliability of the network connections, saying:

I am living in rural part of Tanzania where the network connection is problematic. Thus, whenever I want to access the platform, I ought to travel to township areas or at the RC. Unfortunately, several times when I reached the centre, I found that there was a network failure. This discourages me a lot as I fail to contact my course tutors and peers.

These contrasting findings on this aspect, which deviate from both the central idea of the conceptual framework and the focus of the constructivist theory, might have been contributed by limited tutors' training on how to interact and handle students in online settings. In this regard, extant literature proffers that sufficient guidance on how to interact with students on online platforms for both tutors and students translates in active interaction, which in turn, leads to satisfactory feedback. Similarly, Leibold and Schwarz (2015) argued that

tutors' ability to provide effective online feedback to students is an art which needs to be cultivated and developed by educational institutions to their practitioners through the provision of proper training. The observations, which have been recorded on this variable, are contrary to what was reported by Gilbert (2015), who had

asserted that the mechanism in which online feedback was being provided at St. John Fisher College was very satisfactory. Gilbert's findings suggested that students acknowledged to receive timely, clear and supportive feedback from their tutors during online tutoring sessions.

4.3 Face-to-face tutoring mode practices

Face-to-face tutoring was another issue of concern of this study. This tutoring mode through face-to-face tutoring sessions allow learners in ODL setting to have 'physical' interpersonal contact with their tutors and peers; that is, tutor-learner, and learner-learner contact. Inclusion of this tutoring mode helped to explore the context and procedures in which face-to-face tutoring sessions were organised and managed. Data to address this concern were collected through questionnaires and

focus group discussion. Regarding face-to-face tutoring sessions, the respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with how face-to-face sessions were organised at OUT. The lowest mean score was marked on the disagreement that there were no specially-prepared and designated tutoring document(s) to guide the tutoring sessions to ensure that there is uniformity in the services provided across regional centres. On the other hand, respondents showed the state of indecision the issue of tutors' skills and expertise in handling students during face-to-face sessions. Table 3 presents the results:

Table 3: Students' opinions on the actual practices of face-to-face tutoring mode

Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Organisation and Management of face-to-face sessions	270	1	5	2.16	1.140
Tutors' skills and expertise to handle F2F Sessions	270	1	5	2.79	1.042
Students' Attendance Impressive	270	1	5	2.11	.817
Presence of tutoring guide to lead the scaffolding of students	270	1	5	1.69	.762

The findings from focus group discussion further complement the findings from questionnaires. In the focus group discussions, the respondents also suggested that students were not satisfied with the way face-to-face tutoring sessions were conducted. Students claimed that face-to-face sessions were not as helpful as they were expected. They affirmed during face-to-face interviews that, the core activity was assessing of Student Progress Portfolio (SPP) without much concentration on

students' challenging issues such as difficult topics and how to answer examinations. During the discussion session at Dodoma RC, one of the students said:

Face-to-face tutoring sessions are not as effective as someone would think of, generally, we travel from far, coming to get assistance from our tutors. However, when we reach there we find that the things are not as

organised as they ought to be...most of the time we present our challenging issues, but there is no time set for dealing with those issues; rather tutors sign our SPPs and leave us to go without any tangible assistance.

These observations could have been contributed by the institution’s willingness and awareness of the necessity of laying down relevant strategies, particularly, special guidelines for academic activities for offering tutoring support. Adji and Suciati (2019) support what Molepo and Mothudi (2014) had also affirmed to the effect that students had positive attitude towards face-to-face sessions which were being conducted at Indonesia Open University. They further emphasised the fact that the specific areas, which the organisation of these sessions had excelled included communication between tutors and students; tutors’ capability in handling students’ concerns; and the tutoring environment in general. These observations from the study are contrary to what constitute key aspects of the conceptual framework, which guided this study. For effective scaffolding of students in ODL setting to occur, institutions ought to ensure that all the necessary resources, both pedagogical and technological, as well as a favourable learning environment are in place.

Tutors’ written comments on students’ assignments

The study was also interested in exploring the nature and means through which students receive written feedback from their tutors; the focus was on written main timed tests (MTTs). The expectation was that during the marking process, examiners would provide detailed comments, particularly for wrongly answered questions to guide the students on how they were supposed to answer the question(s). Then, the marked scripts were expected to be returned to the students on time for reference during preparations for final examinations. Data to address this concern were collected using questionnaires, focus group discussions and individual interviews.

Responses on this item indicated that the respondents were not satisfied with the way tutors, and OUT in general handled students’ written assignments. In general, the respondents’ results for all the three items indicate that students disagreed with the provision of written comments, with the lowest score being registered because the marked MTT scripts did not contain adequate comments to help the students understand where they had gone astray to take remedial measures, as Table 4 illustrates:

Table 4: Students’ opinions on the provision of tutors’ written comments

Items on Tutors’ Written Comments	N	Min	Max	Mean	STD
Marked MTT scripts reach students on time	270	1	5	1.83	1.027
Marked MTT scripts contain adequate comments	270	1	5	1.67	.887
Assessment comments are clear enough to motivate students	270	1	5	1.83	.993

Observations made from questionnaires, as table 4 illustrates, have also been confirmed by the findings from focus group discussions, which indicate that there was a problem with the timing for dispatching the marked MTT scripts. Students complained that in many cases

there had been a tremendous delay in receiving their marked tests and, sometimes, they did not receive the documents completely. They further reported that even when they managed to get the documents back on time, they contained inadequate written comments. They affirmed

that, in many cases, when they opened the papers, they found ticks (for correct answers) and crosses (for wrong answers) but without any detailed explanations. One respondent from Kinondoni RC said:

It has been unfortunate that we wait for quite a long time to get feedback through Marked MTT scripts. Sometimes we do not receive these scripts until we finish the respective academic year.

Similarly, another respondent from Katavi RC said:

When we manage to receive the marked scripts, we expect to gain something from our course tutors. ...unfortunately, when we open the booklets, we find that there are ticks and crosses, with very few explanations, which are hardly understood. ...this situation causes a lot of stress to us as we do not understand where the problem is, and how we are supposed to be writing the essays.

Problems associated with marked MTT scripts also emerged during an interview with the personnel in charge of dispatching marked MTT scripts to students in respective regional centres at the DVC-LT-RS's office. Usually, immediately after marking these MTTs, the heads of academic departments with the help of Records Management Officers - RMAs in the faculties would sort them out according to regional centres and deliver them to DVC-LT-RS's office. DVC-LT-RS's office is responsible for dispatching the students' marked tests to respective regional centres. However, during an interview it became apparent that the process of dispatching these scripts was rather slow because of a shortage of funds to transport the parcels. When asked why, the answer was as follows:

All the envelop bundles which you see here contain marked MTT scripts ready dispatching to respective regions. ...we are waiting for funds to post the packages; we have applied for it for quite some time now, but it is not yet out...the situation has become even worse after the mode of transporting the examinations was changed, as for now OUT vehicles are rarely going to regional centres.

Again, these findings might have been contributed by the tutors' limited skills and knowledge on the role of feedback on students' skills development and academic achievement. Describing this aspect, Murtagh and Baker (2009) argued that tutors' written comments are crucial in providing students with essential information, which feed into their next piece of work. They further associated that aspect with markers investing much of their time in providing feedback to students that is clear, detailed, and personalised to help students improve their future work. Meanwhile, Chokwe (2015) argued that feedback is one of the key platforms for tutors to provide intervention for students on where they did right or wrong in their assessed assignments.

The observation from this study is in line with the findings reported by Chokwe (2015) that the written feedback provided to students in their written assignments was not always sufficient and, thus, denied students' opportunities to learn effectively as they were unable to know their weak and strong points. On the other hand, the findings are contrary to what Leibold and Schwarz (2015) had observed in their study on the significance of providing online feedback, which was necessary for tutors to convey feedback to learners. Specifically, the learners needed prompt, frequent, personalised, detailed, clear, specific, and balanced feedback. Indeed, provision of healthy feedback was

found to be consistent with the focus of the theory, as well as the conceptual framework that guided the current study. SCT emphasises on the necessity of feedback which is equated to mentors' role in enhancing the learners' successful progression.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it is apparent that the Open University of Tanzania, like any other ODL institutions on the globe is committed to providing tutoring support to students through different tutoring modes; however, the management and organisation of these tutoring support still faces some challenges which need to be addressed adequately. This experience is likely to affect students' transition and adjustment into ODL learning context. Thus, the study recommends that tutoring services provided through a variety of tutoring modes at

OUT need to be well-planned, well-organised and well-managed to enable these tutoring modes to meet the expectations of students. In other words, during tutoring sessions, all the necessary resources and environment for tutoring provision need to be availed. Moreover, there ought to be a close follow-up on students' participation in the tutoring sessions. This can best work when there is an added value in terms of assigning scores as a reward for participating students, particularly in online tutoring sessions. Tutors need to be well-equipped with sufficient technological and pedagogical skills to handle and motivate students in the tutoring process and adequately guide discussions. This preparedness should include tutors' ability to provide timely, prompt, frequent, personalised, detailed, specific and balanced feedback, to reduce students' discomfort, confusion, anxiety and frustrations among students.

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