

FLIPPED, BLENDED, AND EXPERIENTIAL: INSIGHTS FROM TEACHING ENGLISH TO UNIVERSITY FACULTY

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ABSTRACT

Most research data on online, blended, and flipped classroom come separately from students and teachers. In continuing teacher development programs, most courses are focused on the methodology of teaching a specific subject, and course participants are also subject experts. Training in general topics is often planned based on experiential learning and focuses on developing subject-related activities or using learning technology. This applied small-scale research uses the data from semi-structured interviews with nine university professors who were students in an English language training project. As the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the same course was delivered in face-to-face, online, and blended modality, and a new format to teach English to adults was developed and piloted. Reflections of educators learning a subject outside their field of expertise add valuable information on different teaching modalities. Moreover, accidental experiential learning related to the use of flipped, online, and blended classroom took place for some participants. Thus, a professional development program based on a subject universally interesting to teachers may be feasible. Results also support the claim that blended learning is “the best of all worlds” and incorporating flipped classroom adds value to adult students’ experience.

Keywords: *blended learning, experiential learning, faculty as students, flipped classroom, language learning.*

Introduction

Over the last two decades digital technologies have been widely used in education (Picciano, 2016; UNESCO, 2023); however, they were not a part of mainstream education until the COVID-19 pandemic. With the changes brought by the pandemic, “early indications are that many of the innovations made during the pandemic will continue to be valued and expected by students beyond the crisis” (Brammer & Clark, 2020, p. 456). It is therefore important for the educational community to critically reflect on their use and to ensure that it is justified.

Online, Blended, and Flipped Learning

The greatest advantage of online learning is convenience and flexibility, especially in the asynchronous mode, as it offers learning unrestricted by time, distance, and space (Cole, 2000; Mullen, 2020). However, this is negatively correlated with the quality of interaction, which is an essential element of the educational process (Anderson, 2008; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). On the other hand, synchronous online learning using media with high social presence (Short et al., 1976) is closer to the face-to-face (F2F) modality. Moreover, research found that synchronous online communication in professional setting and adult learning leads to more efficient discussions, increased participation, and lower social stress (Lazarevic & Bentz, 2021; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022).

Blended learning is a combination of F2F and online experiences (Graham, 2006; Means et al., 2013). It combines the advantages of an F2F class with the flexibility afforded by technology (Ahlin, 2021; Law et al., 2019). At the same time, designing a blended course needs thoughtful combination of F2F and online pedagogies rather than transferring learning online (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Owston & York, 2018; Stephenson et al., 2023). In addition, the F2F/online ratio is significant for its success. Most researchers agree that a minimum of 30% of the time needs to be spent online with Medium (36% to 40% online) and High (50% online) blends ensuring the best results (Owston & York, 2018). Besides, the outcomes of a blended course depend on the quality of technology, instructor's flexibility, engagement and support for students, and clear expectations (Baker, 2021; Kintu et al., 2017; Law et al., 2019; Vo et al., 2020). Reflecting on the experience of transforming programs as the result of COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers believe that online and blended learning is especially suitable for adult education (Brachtel et al., 2023; Caldwell et al., 2021; McKenna et al., 2020).

Finally, in the flipped classroom, synchronous class time is spent on challenging or interactive activities that engage students' higher-order thinking skills, after they gain initial input that utilizes lower-order thinking skills asynchronously in advance (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Bloom, 1956; Chen et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2020). Although flipped classroom has now been implemented in language education, many authors consider that more research is needed, especially beyond K-12 and undergraduate education (Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2020; Zou et al., 2022). It is worth noticing that research into implementing online, blended, and flipped learning usually relies on data from either students or teachers. Therefore, a situation when professional educators take a course in a subject unrelated to their discipline, e.g., a foreign language, provides an opportunity to gain more informed insights into what experience these modalities offer. This leads to the first research question (RQ).

RQ 1: what insights into online and blended learning can be gained from educators taking a course in these modalities?

Research has established that some of the most important factors of successful online, blended, and flipped learning is the ability of teachers to engage and support students both F2F and online (Kintu et al., 2017; Law et al., 2019; Vo et al., 2020). That underscores the necessity of not only initial, but also continuous teachers' professional development (PD).

Teachers Professional Development & Experiential Learning

In the analysis of 156 papers on teacher PD, Sankar et al. (2021) grouped them into three categories, based on its definition. While one category does not define PD, the other two base it either on traditional approaches, where PD is focused on improving teacher knowledge and practice, or the new ones that consider individual teacher characteristics, self-directed, and collaborative learning. They also noted that “teachers’ in-class teaching behavior and practices are improved by reflection on, observation of, and discussion about their experiences” (ibid., p. 6), which implies application of experiential learning in PD.

The most cited model of experiential learning is that of Kolb (Kolb, 1984, 2015). It links education, work, and personal development (Morris, 2020; Roessger, 2022). The learning cycle starts with concrete experience (CE) that leads to reflective observation (RO) and abstract conceptualization (AC) and then through active experimentation (AE) to a new concrete experience. Depending on individual preferences, Kolb described its four types and related learning styles: divergent (CE and RO), assimilative (AC and RO), convergent (AC and AE), and accommodative (CE and AC). Jarvis (2011) offered further development of the theory and included alternative learning paths as well as the possibility of not learning.

Experiential learning has been increasingly implemented in higher education (Morris, 2020) as well as in teacher professional development. Green et al. (2022) found that in the process of transitioning from blended to fully remote learning in a Master of Education in Health Professions Education program during COVID-19 pandemic students successfully went through all the stages of the Kolb’s cycle. Alimuddin et al. (2021) used it as a partial foundation for their system of Pedagogical Content Knowledge. The study by Evans et al. (2018) reported a successful implementation of a blended course aimed to develop university faculty’s teaching skills in blended learning that was based on experiential learning. In the above examples, experiential learning was explicitly used to either teach subject knowledge or pedagogical skills. This research is focused on students who are educators, therefore, they might be used to reflective observation. Taking a course unrelated to their subject expertise might trigger a pedagogical learning cycle for at least some of them even without a specific focus on developing pedagogical skills. Thus, the second research question was formulated.

RQ 2: Can accidental experiential learning take place when faculty are on a subject course unrelated to their expertise?

Research Context

Convenience sample of three cohorts of adult learners taking courses of English as Additional Language (EAL) at the Riga Technical University (RTU) Riga Business School English Language Center (RBS ELC) were the focus of this research. All the students were RTU faculty and therefore, had similar levels of education, interests, as well as well-developed learning habits. The courses of the same volume and content were organized within a multi-year project, used the same core materials, and were taught by the same instructors. In the 2019–2020 academic year, two 90-minute classes a week were delivered F2F. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in the prohibition to teach

F2F imposed at different times by the Government of Latvia (Ministru kabinets, 2020a, 2020b, 2021), the delivery format had to be changed.

There were three reasons for incorporating online and asynchronous components and to plan the new format for the long-term rather than as an *emergency remote teaching* measure (Hodges et al., 2020). Firstly, since online modality had become an integral part of adults' working and social life, introducing it into a language class ensures authentic language experience. Besides, research shows that mature students adapt to online learning better than younger undergraduate ones (Brachtl et al., 2023). Secondly, it provides an opportunity for adult working students to take part in classes if they are on a business trip. Thirdly, introducing an asynchronous Pre-Class task ensures that students could prepare for the more interactive or challenging tasks at their own pace and at a convenient time, thus maximizing classroom time.

The course was planned as flipped and blended, with each class divided into a 30-minute asynchronous Pre-Class and 60-minute synchronous class that met once a week F2F and once a week online. However, in the 2020 – 2021 academic year both synchronous classes were taught online, and the original flipped blended format was introduced only in the 2021–2022 academic year. Thus, the same course was taught in three different modalities: F2F, online, and blended, with online and blended courses incorporating the flipped model (Chen et al., 2014; Flipped Learning Network (FLN), 2014; Ginzburg & Daniela, 2024; Ginzburg & Sarva, 2023).

Methodology and Data Collection

I approached research questions from a pragmatic perspective (Burch, 2022; Creswell, 2007; Dewey, 1916; Frey, 2018; Moore, 1966). RBS ELC routinely collected students' opinions of their experience using student evaluation of teaching (SET) forms on the last day of a course. However, since the students in this course were also educators, I aimed to gain their insights after they had had some time to reflect on their experience and to feel its effect. Therefore, I used semi-structured interviews conducted a year after the course and thematic analysis of transcripts as qualitative methods of inquiry. The interview questions started with their motivation to enrol in the course, general opinion of the course and its organization, and its effect on the way they used English. In addition, I asked their opinion on the optimal modality for teaching adults, how teaching their subject compares to teaching English, and whether they had introduced any techniques observed in the English class into their own teaching.

Permission from the University of Latvia Ethics Commission (Nr 71-46/19) was obtained prior to interviews, and all the respondents signed an informed consent form before each interview started. I sent e-mail requests to all course participants, and nine students agreed to be interviewed. Four of them took both F2F and Blended courses, and five were from the Online course. Eight interviews were conducted F2F and one online as the respondent was outside Latvia at the time. See Table 1 for the number of course and interview participants.

Table 1 Research Base

Modality/Academic Year of Studies	Number of RTU Faculty in Training	Number of Interviews
F2F/2019–2020	43	4
Online/2021–2022	42	5
Blended/2021–2022	65	4

All the interviews were conducted in English, recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and sent to the respondents for verification. I analyzed transcripts for the F2F/Blended and Online students separately using the principles of content analysis and recommendations by various researchers (Creswell, 2007; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Kvale, 1996). The process included multiple transcripts' reading, identifying initial categories, classifying them, and defining the final themes.

Results

In the process of analyzing the transcripts, I realized that although some of the questions could serve as themes, additional ones also evolved. See the final list of themes identified in the interviews and the number of times each has been mentioned Table 2.

Table 2 Themes Identified in Semi-Structured Interviews

Theme	N of Times Mentioned by F2F/Blended Students	N of Times Mentioned by Online Students
Motivation to study		
Improving English	16	6
Socializing	0	3
Effect of the course	12	6
Effect of a teacher	23	8
Advantages of F2F	8	4
Advantages of online	10	12
Issues with online	5	5
Flipped classroom	3	5
Optimal variant (as choice)		
F2F	1	0
Online	0	1
Blended	3	3
No difference	0	1
Teaching own subject vs teaching English		
Different	4	4
Similar	5	5
Incorporating teaching methods into own practice	8	3

In the quotes below, respondents are identified as follows: e.g., S1, F2F/Blended – the student who took a F2F and Blended courses and was interviewed first; S1, Online – the student from an Online course who was interviewed first, and so on. Teachers' names are represented by their first initials.

Motivation to Study

The desire to improve English was the main motivating factor with many respondents specifically mentioning grammar, syntax, and speaking. “I am from physical science, and this is important to characterize my expectations. I expected to understand the logic of grammar because I don't know it 100%” (S1, F2F/Blended). “It was to return to an English class and to try to put my grammar in place because it is a sad part of my language experience” (S4, F2F/Blended). “I wanted to improve my English because I work with foreign students and it's important to talk correctly” (S3, Online).

Additionally, the opportunity to socialize was the factor for some students from the Online course: “The main reason was always to improve my English, but it was also a nice ‘ritual’ that we had lessons with nice people and just spent time together” (S4, Online). Some also mentioned the fact that the training was free. “Because of this unique opportunity, you have a project, you know, with everything paid” (S1, F2F/Blended).

Most of the responses reveal primarily internal motivation: to improve the use of language and, for students who took the course during a lockdown, to socialize.

Effect of the Course

A year after the course, all the respondents noted improved understanding and use of English. “The more I learn grammar, the more I understand ‘the construction’. Previously, I didn't understand why people were speaking in a particular way. Now, it's clear to me” (S1, F2F/Blended). “I started to use idioms” (S2, F2F/Blended). “I think I try to use grammar. Yeah. And of course, I pay attention to that” (S4, F2F/Blended). “Well, I can speak, I speak with my friends in English now” (S3, F2F/Blended). “I started to think more about construction of sentences and some idioms. I still use them since these courses. Yes” (S1, Online).

There are two main areas the respondents reveal as affected by training: increased language awareness and improved confidence in using English.

Effect of a Teacher

Comments about teachers were offered without any prompting on my part, which demonstrates the central role of a teacher in an adult language class. “But here's a British guy [a teacher], with perfect English, it's very nice. And he really knows the ‘design’ of wording and phrases” (S1, F2F/Blended). “Actually, the teacher was excellent, K. is native speaker. He was one of the best teachers I think, from my point of view” (S2, Online). Some respondents also gained sociolinguistic knowledge: “And yes, J. was a very nice teacher. I got quite a lot of interesting information about English people, and society. So, it was also interesting from that point” (S3, Online).

The next group of themes is directly related to the RQ 1 and reflects the respondents' experience both as students and as university faculty, for they often commented on their own teaching experience.

Advantages of F2F

According to all the respondents, non-verbal clues are essential for successful communication and studying. "This face-to-face, of course, it's necessary to have. Yeah, it makes, I have to say, this contact with the teacher and the classmates stronger" (S4, F2F/Blended). "For the first-year students, actually, there must be more classes, classical classes. Where we are teaching them, not only the subject but we're also teaching them how to work. How, what, what it means to be a student" (S1, Online).

Thus, there is a strong sentiment that F2F modality must be at least a part of a language course as well as a university education.

Advantages of Online

All the interviewees had the experience of studying language online either entirely or as a part of the Blended course, and both groups valued it. "It was good because at the time I lived outside Riga. And therefore, it was nice that I could just switch on my computer and be on the course" (S3, Online). "It's good as we can work in groups in this e-class. Yeah, it's good. It's a good equipment to split everything. To breakout rooms because when we are all in one room, it's difficult sometimes. Everybody speaks" (S4, F2F/Blended). "Or maybe I'm sitting between two groups who are speaking [in a F2F class]. There is one group, we are in the middle, and there is another, and that's why from both sides I hear this 'sh-sh-sh' sound" (S2, F2F/Blended).

Most comments fall into two categories: convenience of studying from home and the comfort of doing group work in the Zoom breakout rooms.

Issues with Online

The main challenge all the interviewees noted was the need for an extra effort to stay focused when studying and teaching online. "...is also more demanding for learners, definitely, because you have to prepare yourself and you have to do these things even staying on the other side of the screen. So that actually requires more effort from you" (S1, Online). When answering this question, they often recalled their experience as university faculty. "I as a teacher, feel that they are not as concentrated on lectures online as a face-to-face" (S2, F2F/Blended). Other challenges included the need to be comfortable with technology and to have an appropriate environment for studies. "If a person has very big problems with computers, I think it's not good. Then he will be nervous about technical things" (S3, Online). "I think I'm lucky I didn't have any disturbances at home, so I could just sit down and listen and engage with everyone" (S4, Online).

Thus, student and teacher engagement are the main issues of using online modality. Additionally, confidence in the use of technology and a suitable study environment are required.

Flipped Classroom

Respondents from both groups had experienced flipped classroom instruction either in the Online or in Blended courses. “Actually, it’s a good way how to teach: when you must do some home exercises and at least prepare a little bit for next class. I think it’s a good way how to teach” (S2, Online). “Well, I liked these pre-classes – some tasks that we had before. We could think about the topic a little bit which will be discussed later” (S3, Online).

The comments justify incorporating flipped classroom into the new teaching format. The students clearly appreciated the opportunity to prepare for the classwork at a convenient time in advance. The next group of themes reflect interview questions asked to be considered from the position of experts in education.

Optimal Variant

I presented the question of which modality is optimal for adult learners as a choice between F2F, Online, and Blended, and briefly explained Blended to the respondents from the Online course. Out of nine interviewees, one chose F2F, one – Online, and one said it did not matter. The remaining six considered Blended as the optimal modality. “Definitely face-to-face. Definitely” (S1, F2F/Blended). “I don’t know, but maybe blended classes work too but I don’t have such experience. ... I don’t see a big difference. But I like to be at home. Yes. And I like to be in my place. Yes” (S5, Online). “...but now it’s a dream. It’s a perfect situation. I think it can’t be better, what we have at that moment – now” (S3, F2F/Blended). “I think probably this blended variant is the best one” (S2, Online).

Thus, the answers confirm the idea that blended modality ensures *the best of all worlds* in adult education. The final two questions refer to the RQ 2 about whether accidental experiential learning has taken place when educators take a course unrelated to their area of expertise.

Teaching Own Subject vs Teaching English

Some respondents thought there are some similarities in teaching their subjects to teaching English. “...you see, any phenomena are based on some axioms. The same as in a language. There are some ‘main bricks’, you must know them. If you don’t know them, you can’t go ahead. The same in physics, in math, whatever” (S1, F2F/Blended). “Hmm..... in both, we need theory, very good theory. Maybe in my subject, it’s more. The math part, the algorithms’ part and there is less deviation from the rules” (S4, Online).

On the other hand, some respondents mentioned differences. “It is different. I can give this... oh, I don’t know how to call this... like raw material, just to read the law, this can be done at home. ... But you can only learn it by doing this work.” (S2, F2F/Blended). “In physics, we cannot organize the whole course in a remote way, in a distant way. There must be classes which are related with the experimental setup, laboratory works” (S1, Online).

The respondents consider the need to study theory, which in a language course appears to be associated with grammar, common in teaching English and other subjects. The differences seem to be mostly related to the methods of delivery.

Incorporating Teaching Methods into Own Practice

Respondents from F2F/Blended group mentioned a wider range of approaches and techniques that they incorporated into their own teaching than those who studied Online. “And I also notice and teach using his example how to work with a group, from psychological aspects. It’s so interesting! My students know, we all laugh and speak about reinforced concrete column, in different situations and it’s very interesting” (S3, F2F/Blended). “Yeah, this ... discussion with students. Yeah, about a problem. Yeah. How to find the solution for some problem. Yeah, it’s this method I can use. Yeah” (S4, F2F/Blended).

On the other hand, interviewees from the Online course focused more on using flipped classroom and group work in the Zoom breakout rooms. “I also introduced these Pre-Classes, I send some materials before. And, when we worked remotely, then I also used these breakout rooms, tried to use sometimes, which I didn’t do before, in our course” (S3, Online). One respondent clearly stated that they introduced flipped classroom in their own teaching because of taking a language course at RBS ELC. “Oh yes. Because yes, I cut one hour from their studies face-to-face. And yes, they need to listen to this recorded version, recorded slides which are like presentation and main points, but how these points can be elaborated, developed or something done with them – this we do in class” (S2, F2F/Blended). The same person mentioned breakout rooms: “I would like to incorporate this online version, these rooms with maybe two or one person. ... Yes, breakout rooms” (S2, F2F/Blended).

One respondent even admitted that they started to analyze their students’ language: “I ask ‘why? Why did you write this sentence?’ ... Previously, I didn’t do this.... I couldn’t understand the ‘construction’. Now, it’s more or less clear to me, what is the student’s idea and how to improve their construction” (S1, F2F/Blended).

It is apparent that some respondents noticed, reflected on, and started incorporating several techniques from their language classes. Most of those are related to classroom management, flipped classroom, and the use of breakout rooms on Zoom.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research investigated additional insights provided by professional educators who took a language course delivered in a new teaching format. The format differed from the traditional F2F in that a synchronous online class replaced either one or both F2F classes, and an asynchronous Pre-Class task was introduced as an element of flipped classroom.

The New Teaching Format

Apart from the convenience of online learning, respondents specifically noted the feeling of safety provided by the Zoom breakout rooms. Therefore, the findings that online classes lead to lower levels of social stress in undergraduate students (Lazarevic & Bentz, 2021) are relevant to adult education as well. Among the challenges, the effort to keep focused and the need for appropriate study environment were mentioned, confirming the conclusions by Brachtl et al. (2023) who argued that online learning is more suitable for mature students.

Many respondents believed flipped classroom is conducive to the learning process as Pre-Class tasks were developed or curated with the Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) in mind. Their comments also confirm the importance of careful planning for the flipped classroom to ensure successful learning experience stated by various researchers (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Chen et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2020). Finally, by focusing on adult language education, this paper contributes to the research on application of flipped classroom which was previously found insufficient (Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2020; Zou et al., 2022).

Two thirds of the respondents considered that blended modality in the format it was offered to be the optimal one for adult students. Their opinion that F2F communication facilitates social interaction and thus complements online learning, extends the results of Law et al. (2019) on teaching, learning, and social presence in university to include adult education. The new teaching format represents the *replacement model* (McKenna et al., 2020). Moreover, it was planned as a High blend and utilized separate techniques for F2F and online modalities. Therefore, the favorable opinions of the respondents are in line with previous research that emphasized the importance of these factors (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; McKenna et al., 2020; Owston & York, 2018).

Future research could benefit from investigating application of the flipped and blended format to teaching English to university students as well as in other areas of adult education.

Teacher Effect and Experiential Learning

All the respondents mentioned teachers voluntarily. This emphasizes the centrality of a teacher and confirms the validity of papers mentioned in Sancar et al. (2021) that stress the impact of a teacher's personality and behavior on student learning. This further underscores the importance of continuing teacher professional development.

Considering that the respondents are university faculty, finding out whether any accidental experiential learning had taken place was one of the aims of this research. By the time of the interview, some of the participants had started implementing some teaching techniques in their own classes, others concluded that it would be possible during the interview, and another group thought it was not possible. It appears that the first two groups may reflect accommodative and divergent learners in Kolb's (2015) taxonomy and the third might relate to Jarvis' (2011) notion that learning might not occur. Most of the techniques the respondents adopted included the use of the flipped classroom,

Zoom breakout rooms, and group work. Some respondents also reflected on classroom management as they changed the way to explain material, organize discussions, and analyze students' written work.

The respondents' readiness and willingness to incorporate elements of the flipped blended format into their own teaching testifies to the perceived quality and value of their experience. It also confirms that accidental experiential learning has taken place for some participants. This implies a potential for a teacher training program based on experiential learning that combines training in a foreign language with development of pedagogical skills, especially related to flipped and blended teaching. Interdisciplinary research into such a program might be considered in the future.

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