

# LOOKING FOR “THE BEST OF ALL WORLDS”: USING DIFFERENT TEACHING FORMATS IN AN ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM

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*Never let a good crisis go to waste*  
*W. Churchill*

## ABSTRACT

In spring of 2020, when the first Covid-19 related restrictions were introduced, educators were forced to rapidly look for new solutions. Most of those involved moving classes online. However, although quality was a concern for all institutions, ensuring a balance between safety and quality of education presented an additional challenge to providers of non-formal adult education. Therefore, developing a course to accommodate the new and, probably, enduring reality as well as carefully monitoring its delivery was essential. Even though different modalities have been used in education for decades, only now have they become a part of the mainstream. Most educators were used to working in either traditional face-to-face or online mode, while some students could have used a combination of both as well as other web-based resources. Thus, shifting from one modality to another or mixing them in a course presented certain challenges for both educators and students. This paper describes a blended hybrid program of English as an Additional Language for adults developed at RTU Riga Business School English Language Center in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The program has the same basic content as previous face-to-face one but incorporates various carefully analyzed modalities. Specifically, it combines a face-to-face (F2F) and remote online synchronous learning, and adds asynchronous part to the course. It has been piloted in open public groups as well as corporate courses with student feedback analyzed vis-a-vis face-to-face courses. This paper analyzes the development of a program for open groups.

**Keywords:** *course modality, language training, F2F, English as a Foreign Language, teaching English, remote, asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid*

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted practically all teaching and learning above the pre-school level to suddenly move into an emergency remote

teaching (Hodges et al., 2020), and both educators and learners had to make adjustments as best as they could (Ross & DiSalvo, 2020). While initially most of the institutions acted in the so called 'crisis' mode, almost two years later it has become evident that online and remote learning will continue to be part of mainstream education. There have always been numerous advocates for each of face-to-face, remote, and online education among educators and students. However, the Covid-19 related crisis has prompted educators to experiment combining various modalities. At the same time students, especially the ones participating in nonformal education, who have very low cancellation cost, need to see the value in such a course. It is therefore essential to both carefully plan such programs (Gacs et al., 2020) and to monitor their delivery. It is especially challenging in planning and teaching an additional language course due to the highly social nature of language learning (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Toth & Davin, 2016).

### **Learning modalities**

Traditionally, learning process has been organized F2F with students and teachers meeting in the same place at the same time. Whether it happens in class, laboratory, or a football pitch, both verbal and nonverbal communication is fully facilitated and contained within the allocated time of the class. With the development of digital technology, the variety of course delivery options have increased. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, remote learning has been used as a way to provide structure, ensure learning and assessment, communicate with students via technology (Daniela & Visvizi, 2021).

Ally (2008) defines online learning as using the Internet for accessing instructional materials, for interacting with those, as well as instructor and other learners, and for receiving support in the learning process. The obvious advantage of online learning for students is that it is not hindered by time zones, location, or distance, and allows flexibility of access (Cole, 2000). In asynchronous online learning, students can access online materials at any time, as it is self-paced and not restricted either by location, or by time (Mullen, 2020), while synchronous online learning allows for real time interaction between students and the instructor (Ally, 2008). Baker (2021) adds that it refers to both online and onsite synchronous learning.

Teachers and course developers working in an online learning context face the challenge to construct an environment that is conducive for learning, creating community, and accommodates content and assessment. As Anderson (2011) puts it, "There is no single, right medium of online learning, nor a formulaic specification that dictates the kind of interaction most conducive to learning in all domains with all learners" (p. 154).

In the last decade, universities have been increasingly using a combination of F2F and computer-assisted pedagogy as an alternative modality

of delivery (Lindorff & McKeown, 2013, Picciano, 2016). Blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction (Graham, 2006). Means et al. (2013) define blended learning as “a combination of online and face-to-face experiences ... where students learned 25% or more but not all of the assessed content over the Internet.” (p. 6) Combining modalities allows for a greater flexibility of delivery, ‘blending’ “the benefits of in-residence education with online technological advances” (Ahlin, 2021).

The Online Learning Consortium, formerly The Sloan Consortium, considers a course blended if the amount of online time takes up between 30% and 79% of the total course time (Allen et al., 2007), and it does not equal a simple transfer of a F2F activities and course material online. Designing a blended course requires careful combination of both online and onsite pedagogies and, therefore, an extra effort on the part of instructors. Moreover, the proportion of online/onsite classes plays a role in how students perceive the courses (Owston & York, 2018). Medium (36% to 40% online) and High (50% online) blends showed more satisfied students than Low (27% to 30% online) and Supplemental blends (100% face-to-face with weekly online tutorial sessions). At the same time, learning attainment has been found higher in Medium and High blends than in the Low one, although there has not been detected a significant difference between the Medium and High blends. Thus, to fully benefit from a blended course, institutions need to replace at least 30% of F2F classes with online ones for successful student-teacher and student-student interaction. It must also be noted that online knowledge construction, instructor’s support and engagement with students play a vital role in the design of a blended course and students’ learning (Law et al., 2019, Vo et al., 2020).

Kintu et al., (2017) found that among the design features, technology quality, online tools, and face-to-face support are predictors of learner satisfaction while learner characteristics of self-regulation and attitudes to blended learning are predictors of satisfaction.

Attainment of learning in a blended modality is comparable to that of the F2F one provided the proportion of online classes is 30%, course material is well-organized and relevant, self-learning and good time-management are encouraged (Monk et al., 2020).

Although the terms ‘blended’ and ‘hybrid’ are often used interchangeably, in this research we consider a combination of F2F and online instruction as blended, and a combination of synchronous and asynchronous as hybrid.

## **Background for the study: English Language Programs at RTU Riga Business School**

Riga Business School (RBS) was founded in 1991 by Riga Technical University (RTU), State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo, and University of Ottawa with the aim of providing an MBA degree taught entirely in English. To prepare candidates, the RBS English Language Center (ELC) was established by the English Language Institute at SUNY Buffalo in the same year. Since then, RBS ELC has been teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) to adults mainly in open groups for general public and corporate courses to companies and organizations. EAL is defined as 'additional language learning at any point in the life span after the learning of one or more languages has taken place in the context of primary socialization in the family; in most societies this means prior to formal schooling and sometimes in the absence of literacy mediation.' (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Additionally, since 2017 RBS ELC has been also offering a Pre-University English program for secondary school pupils aged 14–18.

### **The Content**

The RBS EAL program was initially developed as a fee-based continuing education program for adults to prepare them for master's level studies in English. Thus, it attracts mostly well-educated students, and still retains a strong academic component. The program is built on the basis of a social constructivist theory (North & Piccardo, 2016) as pedagogical approach to teaching an additional language benefits from combining cognitive and social perspectives (Toth & Davin, 2016). Students are placed in groups according to what can be approximately defined as their linguistic Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000), instructors act as facilitators in a classroom focused on interaction, communication, and discussion. Studies (Higgs & Clifford, 1982) have shown the benefits of explicit grammar instruction and sociocultural theory recommends that it is semantically linked to a course (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Thus, functional grammar, which emphasizes grammatical choice as a tool to express meaning (Myhill, 2021) is taught as a part of a course but the teaching of grammar follows the discourse logic of a course.

The most popular courses are General English, which is taught at seven levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and Business English taught at three levels of CEFR. In the open groups each level is taught by two different instructors over two 96-academic-hour sessions, with one instructor focusing on vocabulary, reading, speaking, and listening, while the other – on speaking, functional

grammar, and writing. The two parts are planned to be interrelated and the instructors work as a team so that grammatical structures are recycled in the reading and speaking class while vocabulary – in the grammar class. Standard corporate courses are 100 academic hours in volume and groups are taught by one instructor who focuses on all language skills. All course syllabi are standardized in order to ensure graduate progression between levels, and coursebooks are carefully selected to facilitate it. To ensure smooth transition between parts of a course, instructors are required to follow a standard outline; however, they adjust the pace and use additional materials based on the needs of a particular group. Standard syllabi for corporate groups are based on the same materials as the ones for open groups but may be adjusted to the client's needs.

### **The Process**

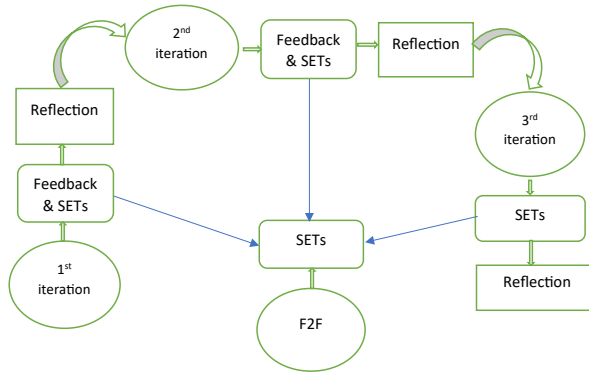
The academic process at RBS ELC aims to identify each student's learning needs and to meet those in the most effective way. The student's experience includes several stages. Students are placed in a group based on a written test followed by an interview with the ELC Director; however, returning students who completed a course earlier than a year are placed in a group without a test. Until the spring of 2019, the test was in a paper form administered on-site. Groups meet twice a week, each student receives a set of coursebooks, and to complete a course and earn a certificate, students need to attend minimum 75% of classes, actively participate in classroom activities, do homework, and pass tests. Since 2015, Google Classroom has been used as a Learning Management System (LMS) for posting homework, additional materials, and communicating with students. Additionally, administrative information is communicated to students via e-mail by ELC Coordinator. ELC students are asked for feedback twice during each session: a short Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) is administered during the third week of the course, and a more detailed one is given to students in the last class.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The objective of this research was to discover the optimal format i.e., a combination of modalities and timing of classes, to teach EAL to adults using various modalities. As it was meant to inform practice, we employed a pragmatic worldview (Saunders et al., 2019).

The research was focused on the RBS ELC program for adults who study General and Business English in open groups as a non-formal education program. As changes and adjustments were made in response to both students' feedback and Covid-19 related changes in the environment, an

action research was chosen as the method (Clark et al., 2020). Overall, three iterations of the format have been implemented and results of SETs were compared to that of the F2F one (see Figure 1).

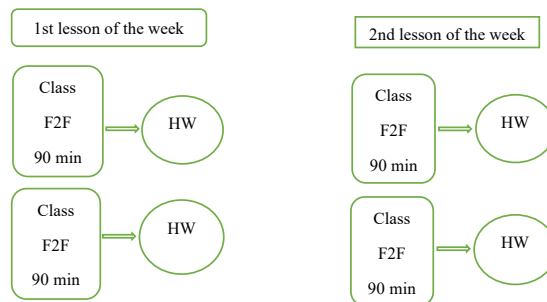


**Figure 1.** Research design: action research

The question we sought to answer was: which teaching format do adult students see as optimal? We used mixed method (QUANT + qual) in this research. To find out students’ opinion, standard SETs collected after every course were analyzed. Those are survey forms combining a Likert-type questionnaire with values ranging from 1 to 4 with open-ended questions and administered on the last day of a course. Average values were calculated for each survey item. We also used additional surveys related to students’ opinion of their experience and asking them for suggestions.

**The Pre-Covid-19 Face-to-Face (F2F)**

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, all courses at RBS ELC had been taught F2F. In the open groups, adult students met in RBS classroom twice a week from 18:00 till 21:00, and ELC ran three 12-week sessions a year (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** ‘Pre-COVID’ F2F format

As a non-formal fee-based adult education provider, RBS ELC monitors the proportion of students continuing or returning to studies. A consistent percentage of those (between 30% and 50% in each session) is a sign of student satisfaction with the training they get. This is further confirmed by consistently high results of final SETs, which is why the F2F course is taken as a benchmark for this research.

### **Environmental context**

Following the spike of COVID-19 infections in Latvia, on 12 March 2020 the Government declared the State of Emergency (Order of Cabinet of Ministers No. 103, 2020) effective from 13 March. As the result, any on-site training was prohibited, and remote learning was recommended in all educational institutions. Initially planned to last until 14 April 2020, the State of Emergency was extended until 11 June, 2020. With the sudden change in course delivery mode, the teaching community realized that there was a need to quickly transfer education online, even though levels of technical and pedagogical support were less than ideal. In this situation, RBS ELC cancelled its Spring semester, and academic staff concentrated on developing a new format of the program that would be relevant in the future.

In the Fall semester of 2020 studies began on-site but as the number of Covid-19 cases increased, the Government declared the State of Emergency from 9th November 2020 to 6th April 2021, effective immediately (Cabinet Order No 655 of 6th November 2020, Cabinet of Ministers, 2020). Following this, all classes were moved online.

The 2021/2022 academic year started with on-site classes. However, a new State of Emergency was declared from 11 October 2021 until 11 January 2022 (Cabinet order No 720). Moreover, from 21 October the country went into an official lockdown that lasted until 15 November (Amendment to the Order No 748). Formal education courses could continue to run on-site for fully vaccinated students; however, non-formal educational programs were transferred online.

### **Rationale for a new format**

Developing a new format, we pursued the following objectives: to maintain the quality of course delivery, to accommodate evolving needs of adult students, and to avoid potential disruption of training if it becomes necessary to quickly move into a fully online modality in the future. To meet these objectives, we considered the following:

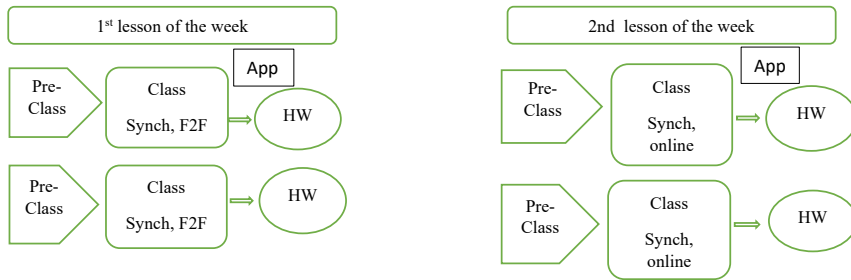
1. Introducing an online component. With adult students increasingly working and communicating online and organizations considering hybrid work even after the pandemic, online language classes provide authentic experience. Besides, having a part of the course conducted online adds to

the convenience as students do not need to commute to the campus, and can participate in a class even when travelling.

2. Introducing an instructor-curated asynchronous part of classes. In any language class students perform some tasks individually, e. g., read a text before discussing it. Assigning those tasks to be done outside the class accommodates students with different paces and learning habits and allows to devote classroom time to more interactive or challenging tasks. Besides, anecdotal evidence shows that online classes are often slower than F2F ones, as sharing materials and putting students into pairs and groups in an on-line class takes longer. Therefore, a short Pre-Class task as an integral part of every class should enhance student experience.
3. Introducing a mobile application for training certain skills. While students choose a language center to have classes with an instructor, certain parts of a language training can be delegated to technology and done asynchronously. Besides, different adult students have different learning needs when it comes to sounds, stress, and intonation. Thus, we have chosen English Language Speech Assistant (ELSA) – an application based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) to provide personalized pronunciation and speaking training to our students.
4. Incorporating learning analytics. To provide data-based assessment and personalized recommendations for individual students, marks for graded Pre-Class tasks, written assignments, and tests should be collected and available for an analysis on Google Classroom Grades. Besides, the mobile application students use for training pronunciation provides data on time spent on the application and progress results for both individual students and groups to assigned teachers and a course director.

Based on the above, we designed a blended hybrid format which incorporates synchronous F2F and online modalities and adds asynchronous teacher-curated and mobile parts. A short asynchronous instructor-curated Pre-Class task was added to each class, and an AI-based mobile application for pronunciation training was provided for students in addition to their coursebooks. Instructors used Google Forms to create quizzes wherever possible so that the results automatically transferred to Google Classroom's gradebook. Another part of learning analytics was provided by the mobile application. The first synchronous class of the week was planned F2F and the second online (Figure 3).





**Figure 3.** A blended hybrid modality

Note. This represents a blended hybrid format that incorporates synchronous F2F and remote learning, as well as asynchronous components. Changing government regulations combined with students' feedback led to several adjustments to the format. Thus, three distinct iterations of the format followed.

## The delivery

The 1<sup>st</sup> iteration of the new format was first implemented in the Fall semester of 2020 (September–December). 90-minute synchronous classes were run from 18:00 till 21:00 for 12 weeks, similar to the previous F2F format. However, to ensure that it meets students' needs and facilitates their motivation to learn a language, careful monitoring and adjustments were necessary.

Following the Government regulations in November 2020, all synchronous classes were moved online thus effectively turning this course into a remote hybrid one. In December 2020, towards the end of the semester, we routinely surveyed students via Google Forms asking them about plans to continue studies and offering them a possibility to comment. We received  $n = 27$  responses, and some of the most typical comments were the following (our translation from Latvian):

1. 'If the classes are to be online, I suggest to shorten each lesson by 30 min (so that the total class time is 2 hours), and to prolong the course. 3 hours in front of a computer is very tiring and harms one's eye-sight.'
2. 'I would prefer classes max 2 hours in one evening, especially if they are online.'
3. 'I really like that the classes are on Zoom, that saves both time and money (I'm not from Riga). I will be happy if they continue online'.

Based on the students' suggestion, we planned the 2<sup>nd</sup> iteration of the course to have synchronous classes for only 60 minutes and the course lasting 18 weeks to maintain the same volume. Since the course started when only online training was possible, it was held entirely online from February through June 2021. In March 2021, to gain students' opinion

of the new format, we surveyed them using Google Forms and received  $n = 12$  comments, most of which fell into two categories grouped below.

Entirely favorable:

1. 'The learning process is very pleasant, 1h + 1h after work is doable. Not tiring'.
2. 'I'm satisfied, especially with the format from 18:00 till 20:10. I like the ELSA app a lot'.
3. 'The learning process is well-organized, effective, and comprehensive'.
4. 'I like the introduced model very much, and it's very convenient that classes are online. I'm not from Riga, it's good that there's no need to waste time commuting'.

All F2F classes take place in Riga, which means a long commute for someone who lives outside the city. It became especially problematic for people who worked remotely.

Less favorable:

5. 'The first course was easier to perceive, perhaps because now it's too much online'.
6. 'Online classes are tiring and it's difficult to concentrate – especially in the second part. It would be ideal to have classes 1 × on-site and 1 × online.'

Based on students' feedback, a 3<sup>rd</sup> iteration of the course was planned as blended hybrid with 60-min classes from September'21 through January'22. From mid-November and until the end of the course, however, due to the renewed Covid-19 restrictions, it had to be moved entirely online again. Students' opinions of this format are reflected in the final course evaluation.

## Data Collection and Analysis

This research analyses SETs administered to all students on the last day of classes. The original form used in a F2F course contained 26 questions grouped into several categories: instructor, textbook and teaching materials, homework, and general reaction to the course. The form used in all three iterations of the hybrid courses had additional three questions regarding the mobile application. The form incorporates a Likert-type questionnaire, which is often used in education, and employs values from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) to avoid a neutral response. Collected data is routinely processed and mean values are calculated for each item in each group separately. For this research, mean values were calculated for every cohort of students, with the numbers of responses as follows:

'Pre-Covid' F2F (Fall'18): F2F with 90-minute classes. Administered on paper in class,  $n = 126$ .

1<sup>st</sup> iteration (Fall'20): blended hybrid with 90-minute classes for half a course, then online hybrid. Administered on Google Forms outside class,  $n = 46$ .

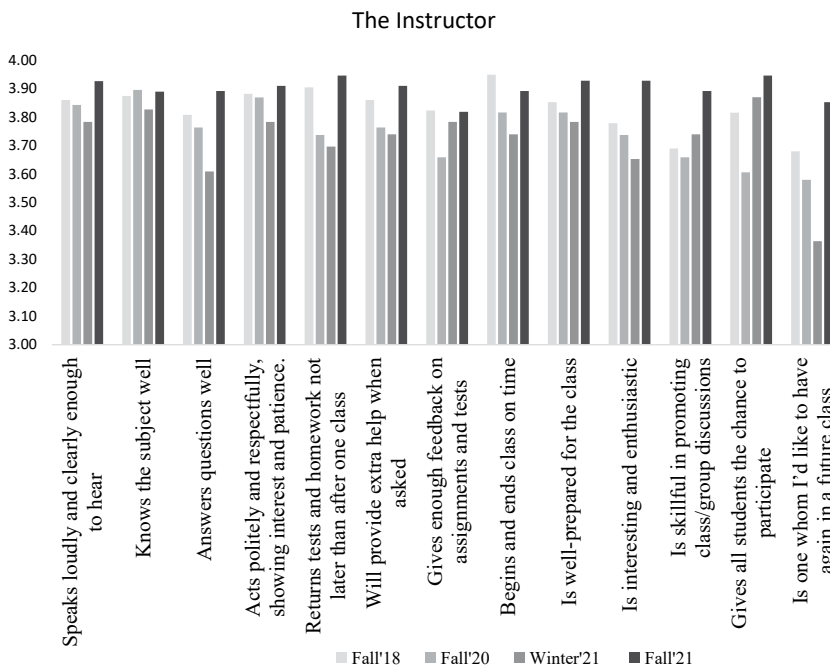
2<sup>nd</sup> iteration (Winter'21): online hybrid with 60-minute classes. Administered on Google Forms outside class,  $n = 23$ .

3<sup>rd</sup> iteration (Fall'21): blended hybrid with 60-minute classes for half a course, then online hybrid. Administered on Google Forms in class,  $n = 55$ .

## Results

The research seeks to compare students' perceptions of different formats of teaching EAD course of the same content. The mean values calculated for each item of the questionnaire are presented in graphs grouped for each category. Figure 4 compares mean values of responses concerning instructors.

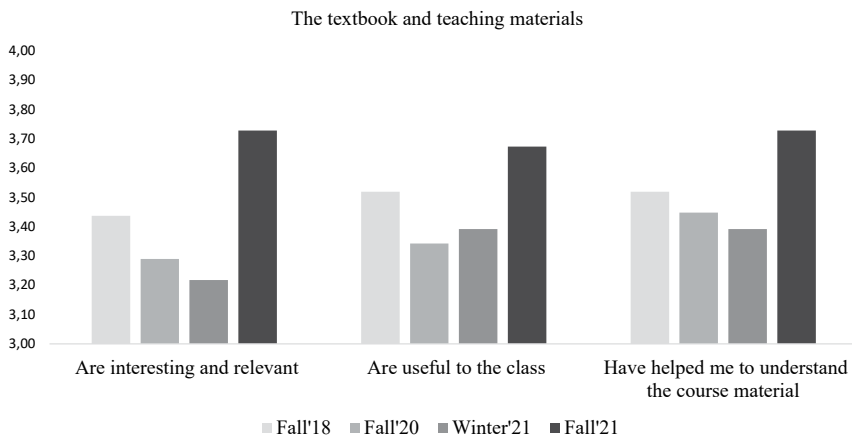
ELC instructors have always scored high in ELC students' evaluations, and such was the case in all iterations. Considering that the F2F modality (Fall'18) is used as a benchmark, it is perhaps understandable that for most of the aspects, the scores for that modality are higher than for the blended hybrid (90-min classes) and online hybrid.



**Figure 4.** Summary of students' responses to questions regarding instructors

The 0.02 difference in scores between Fall’18 and Fall’20 for ‘knows subject well’ is not significant. The differences in scores for different aspects between the blended hybrid 90-min and online hybrid may indicate that students find it easier to appreciate personality of a teacher when they have a chance to see them F2F (‘answers questions well’, ‘acts politely showing interest and patience’, ‘is interesting and enthusiastic’). Surprisingly, students see online modality as more conducive to participating in group discussions as well as getting feedback on assignments on time. One reason for the former might be the fact that shy students feel more comfortable participating in group work online (Campbell, 2007; Muhammad, 2020). At the same time, the highest scores in all aspects except time management for the blended hybrid 60-min format (Fall’21) shows that students see their instructors as best when they teach in this modality.

The next group of questions focused on teaching materials. Core course-books remained unchanged for each level in all the modalities, and instructors supplement them with their own materials to reflect their individual teaching style and to better suit the needs of a particular group. Figure 5 shows mean values of student responses.



**Figure 5.** Summary of student responses regarding to course materials

In general, students in F2F modality see the textbooks and materials in a more favorable light than those who studied in a hybrid blended (90 min) and online ones. However, those who studied in a hybrid blended (60 min) see them as especially interesting and useful.

In addition to books and extra materials used in class, in Fall’18 instructors also posted materials for extra practice on Google Classroom. Some of those were mandatory but some optional. In the hybrid format, both

for blended and online modalities, a Pre-Class tasks were regularly posted. Students' evaluation of online materials is reflected in Figure 6.

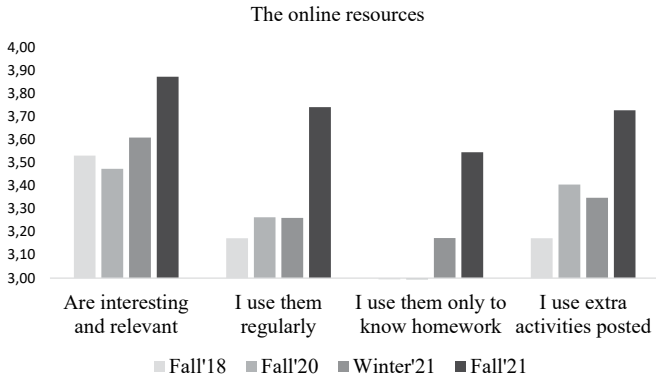


Figure 6. Summary of student responses regarding online resources

Apparently, even though students find online resources interesting, they do not use them regularly if teachers do not require it. However, high scores in all questions reflecting active use of online materials show that students like those. The hybrid blended (60 min) modality again seem to be the most motivating

In 2020, we introduced English Language Speaking Assistant (ELSA) – an AI-based mobile application for training pronunciation and vocabulary. It provides individual coaching based on each student's learning needs and instructors and the ELC Director have access to learning analytics. Questions about ELSA application were included in the form starting from Fall'20. Students' responses are summarized in Figure 7.

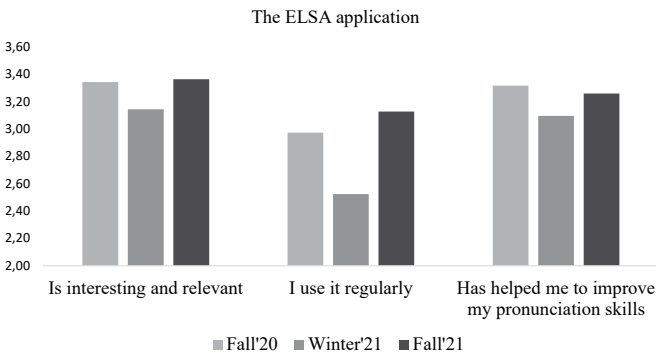
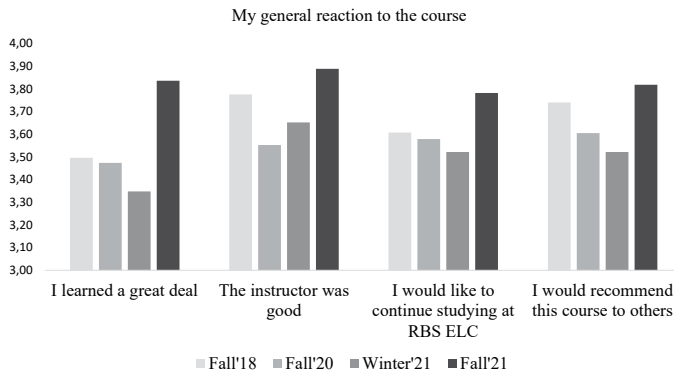


Figure 7. Summary of student responses regarding a mobile application

Apparently, students learning in blended modalities appreciate the application more and use it more regularly than those who study online. However, students use ELSA more when teachers remind them to do so.

The final set of questions deals with students’ general perception of a course and is especially important when making decisions on the future course formats. The results are summarized in Figure 8.



**Figure 8.** Summary of student responses regarding general perception of course

When asked to provide a general impression of the course, students apparently believe that the blended hybrid (60 min) format is the most preferable in all categories, with F2F as the second best. Blended hybrid (90 min) seems to be seen as preferable to online hybrid in all categories except how students see the instructor. One of the reasons for that might be that the format that included an online modality was taught for the first time in Fall’20, and it took some time for the instructors to get used to it.

## Discussion

This research aimed to discover the format, i. e., a combination of modalities and timing of classes, of teaching EAL that adult students studying in open groups would consider as optimal. Although initially the course was planned as a blended hybrid, it underwent significant adjustments following not only changes in the governmental regulations but also considering student feedback and suggestions. Thus, three different iterations of the course have been implemented: blended hybrid with four 90-minute classes, online hybrid with four 60-minute classes, and blended hybrid with four 60-minute classes a week. Student opinions on teaching format from two separate surveys were used to guide changes introduced in the course format. The online hybrid modality is seen as the least favorable by students who study in open groups. This contrasts with the result of a study where

adult students in an EAL corporate course of similar content and approach displayed no significant difference of opinion between F2F and an online hybrid format (Ginzburg, 2022). The groups are different in two ways: corporate classes take place during working hours and are funded externally, while students in open groups study in their free time and cover tuition fully or partially. It would be useful to further research these differences by interviewing students from both groups. Another area for further research is to compare learning outcomes in each format by comparing results of achievement tests as well as delayed post-course proficiency test.

## Conclusion

The results of final evaluations in each iteration were analyzed vis-à-vis a traditional face-to-face format, which was considered a benchmark. The results clearly indicate students' preference for the hybrid blended format with 60-minute classes that has evolved in the last iteration. Therefore, a recommendation to use it in future may be considered.

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