

Adults' Perceptions of Studying English in Face-to-Face, Online, and Blended Modalities

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Abstract

Questions regarding the most effective teaching modality in foreign language instruction remain especially important for adult educators, since adult students have conflicting demands on their time and need to see the value of training. This research was centered around three cohorts of students taking courses of English of the same content and volume from the same provider. The students were university faculty and thus, of comparable demographics, and the courses were funded by the university. Over several years, and as the result of COVID-related restrictions, the courses were delivered in face-to-face (F2F), online, and blended modalities incorporating flipped classroom in the latter two. The aim of the research was to investigate the impact of a course modality on the perceived teaching effectiveness of a language course for adults. A quasi-experiment was used as a type of sequential mixed method. Relative perceived effectiveness of each modality was drawn from a combination of student evaluation of teaching (SET) and semi-structured interviews with former students who acted as both alumni and experts in education. SET comparison revealed no significant differences in results among the three modalities while interviews indicated a preference for the blended learning. At the same time, SETs of fee-paying students with comparable demographics taking similar courses at the same institution and analyzed previously showed a distinctive preference for a blended approach. That might be due to the differences in resources these two groups invested in studies: time vs time and money. The results imply that adult language educators have the flexibility to choose a modality while ensuring teaching effectiveness.

Keywords: course modality, perceived teaching effectiveness, English as an additional language, adult learners

According to UNESCO (2021), the unprecedented increase in life expectancy in the 21st century means that people will need to participate in education later in life, as their personal and professional needs change. Moreover, the demands of the changing labor market require that people constantly upgrade their skills while employed as “learning should be lifelong, life-wide, with weight and recognition given to adult education” (p. 117). At the same time, the European Statistical Office (Eurostat) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report that only approximately 40 per cent of adults participate in education annually and slightly below 12 per cent do so within any 4-week period. Although there is some growth in participation, its rate is insufficient to meet the demands of the labor market (Eurostat, 2023; Mavropoulos et al., 2021; OECD, 2020a).

The main reasons respondents cite as preventing them from involvement in adult education refer to the situational barriers as defined in the seminal work of Cross (1992): lack of financial resources and lack of time (OECD, 2020b), which represent the total cost of participating in education. It follows that, on the one hand, there is room for growth, and on the other hand, reducing the total cost of participation might increase the number of adults partaking in education. Delivering training via different modalities may be one of the ways to accomplish such a goal as it provides more flexibility (Ahlin, 2021).

Research into using different modes in education is mostly focused on university students (Tran, 2022; Watson et al., 2023; Webb & Doman, 2020; Willits & Brennan, 2017). However, as adult education programs are usually of short duration and cancellation costs are low, training providers need to make sure that students and employers view the training as valuable (Gacs et al., 2020; OECD, 2020a). While online methodology continues to be used even after its introduction as the emergency approach during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020), students still question its effectiveness compared to traditional face-to-face (F2F) teaching. At the same time, considering the social nature of language and language learning (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Toth & Davin, 2016), comparing students’ perceptions of a language course delivered via different procedures may be useful for adult educators in general. This research aims to examine the impact of a specific style of course delivery on the adults’ perceptions of the effectiveness of a language course offered F2F, online, and in the blended modality. The findings also contribute to the general understanding of the perception and use of the three approaches in adult education.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The literature review analyses publications related to students’ perceptions as an indicator of teaching effectiveness. The next section briefly describes the research context. The methodology presents research questions and describes research design as well as methods of data collection. The ensuing segment presents and discusses the main findings. Finally, the conclusion, a discussion of limitations the study, and recommendations for further research are provided.

Literature Review: Students' Perceptions

Students' perceptions have been used as an instrument for improving teaching quality as well as for administrative purposes in various universities around the world (Kulik, 2001; Stroebe, 2020; Zhao et al., 2022). They are usually expressed through Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET), which is administered as a survey form containing a series of questions related to a course, instructor, materials, and sometimes, facilities. Students then rate each item on a Likert scale (Likert, 1932) from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, and mean values are calculated for each item. Zhao et al. (2022) state that, although Purdue university introduced the first standardized student evaluations in 1915, they “began to use the standardized student evaluation scale to evaluate teachers' teaching, which is considered to be the beginning of the student evaluation system” (p. 1) in 1927.

Although using SETs represents an efficient way of gauging students' perceptions, it is still a controversial measure. In his meta-analysis of accepted expert opinions on student ratings, Kulik (2001) argues that researchers tend to prove that “ratings correlate to a satisfactory degree with other admittedly partial and imperfect measures of effectiveness” (p. 11). He suggests that evidence of students' learning, students' and alumni' comments, and rating by classroom observers be used in assessing teaching effectiveness. However, he admits that the prevailing opinion is that students learn more from highly rated teachers, and their comments correlate with their ratings and with those of the alumni and observers. Besides, teachers benefit from students' ratings for they “profit from the information the ratings provide” (p. 23). In their turn, Willis and Brennan (2017) demonstrate the evidence that course ratings are unrelated to students' characteristics, the level of difficulty, and the volume of work required from students, which makes them a valid indicator. At the same time, Spooner and Christiaens (2017) noted that students who believe that SETs have value tend to give higher ratings.

There are both educators and researchers who believe that education belongs to the category of services that views students as consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Lee & Deale, 2019). University students' opinions are shared on The RateMyProfessors.com (RMP) website which uses the style of consumer forums and customer reviews. The results of investigating the RMP data confirm the research into validity of SETs. However, investigating more than 16,800 professors on RMP, Chiu and colleagues discovered a “professor's brand” is a factor affecting students' perception (Chiu et al., 2019). They assert that “professors' working in top colleges can be regarded as a kind of brand awareness for students and that this factor might have a positive effect on perceived quality” (p. 452). The same might be said about any instructor who has worked in a well-regarded institution for a long enough time to develop “the brand”. Willis and Brennan (2017) discovered that students' perception of course quality is directly correlated, among others, with teachers' behavior in class. Moreover, Lee and Deale (2019) found that professors' personalities have a deciding impact on the perceived quality of a course in their research into perceived quality of professors in tourism and hospitality education. Although considering students as customers might be arguable in higher education, it is different for adult education. Therefore, a particular type of valued professor's brand and

teachers' personalities are even more essential for adults to perceive their experience as positive.

Stroebe (2020) is much more critical in his view of using SETs though and argues that they can lead to grade inflation and poor teaching, in addition to not being valid. His argument that there is no correlation between SETs and students' learning is also corroborated by studies looking into the relationship between students' learning and professors' ranking (Uttl et al., 2017). Some other factors also impact students' ratings. Students' interest in a subject, physical attractiveness and general likeability of instructors, their minority status, and to some extent, their gender, are among those which indicate evidence of the *halo effect* (Keeley et al., 2013 as cited in Allred et al., 2022) in student ratings. In an educational setting, the *halo effect* refers to the situation "when one aspect of an instructor influences the instructor's overall rating" (Allred et al., 2022, p. 71). Experiments show that a behavioral tactic like memorizing students' names on purpose leads to higher ratings as the result of the halo effect.

Keeping in mind the challenges of adult education, students' perception of teaching and their own performance are crucial for both their learning and participation in education. However, the fact that adult students do not form long-lasting relationships with course providers may be the reason why analysis of students' perceptions is usually limited to university students and the use of SETs as the most efficient measure. This paper contributes to the research by focusing specifically on adult students taking a non-degree language course. At the same time, students' ratings must not be the only tool to gauge their perceptions. Evaluation procedures should also include open-ended questions as a part of SETs and post-evaluation procedures (Ulker, 2021) as well as opinions of alumni and experts. The students in this research are educators with experience of teaching in different modalities. Therefore, their participation in classes may be considered as professional observation. Together, these provided a basis for a comprehensive analysis of the perceived experience of adults studying English via different methodologies, which contributes to the field of adult language education and adult education in general.

Research Context

The research took place at the Riga Technical University (RTU) Riga Business School English Language Center (RBS ELC) in Latvia. RBS ELC was established in cooperation with the English Language Institute at State University of New York at Buffalo in 1991 and operated until 2023. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all instruction at RBS ELC was conducted face-to-face (F2F). However, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Latvia introduced changes in legislation (Ministru kabinets, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). As a result, course format had to be re-developed to accommodate those. After the pandemic started, the course was planned to be offered as flipped and blended: each 90-minute lesson divided into a 30-minute Pre-Class and 60-minute synchronous Class with the Class meeting once a week F2F and once a week online. However, in the second half of the 2020-2021 academic year, F2F teaching was prohibited in Latvian universities (Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2021), therefore both synchronous classes met virtually, retaining the flipped model (Chen et al., 2014;

Flipped Learning Network (FLN), 2014). Only in the 2021-2022 academic year, students had the flipped blended course.

There were three reasons to introduce the electronic component and to plan it to remain even after the restrictions on F2F teaching were lifted. Firstly, virtual teaching and learning has become an accepted communication medium for both work and private lives; therefore, a synchronous online class provides an authentic language experience. Secondly, reducing the total time needed for participating in training increases convenience for students. Besides, there is evidence that students experience lower levels of social stress in online classes compared to F2F (Lazarevic & Bentz, 2021), flipped classroom suits undergraduate students who prioritize control over their learning (Tang et al., 2020), and that more mature students adapt better to studying from home than younger undergraduates (Brachtl et al., 2023). Thirdly, introducing an asynchronous component as the Pre-Class task allows students to complete some activities at their own pace and at a convenient time while instructors can use the classroom time for interactive or challenging tasks. At the same time, the importance of student-teacher interaction and initial F2F communication (Kaiper-Marquez et al., 2020) led to the planning of the first class of the week to be F2F in the original blended format. Most of the groups had a long course of 25 weeks, but some studied more intensively, with double classes spread over 12.5 weeks. However, as the course structure does not impact students' perceptions (Ginzburg & Daniela, 2023), in this research, data from both variants were analyzed together. Figure 1 illustrates the three modalities.

Figure 1

The Three Modalities (developed by T. Ginzburg)



Note: HW stands for homework.

Instruction in all the modalities followed the same overall process. Teachers used standardized outlines developed by senior faculty and RBS ELC Director for each level. The outlines were based on selected commercially available coursebooks and served as a framework. Teachers supplemented core coursebooks with additional materials based on the needs of their students. These included printed and online materials selected, curated, or designed by teachers. Instructors also used Google Classroom to communicate with students, post assignments and supplementary materials, record grades and attendance. At the end of a course and provided

they met the criteria of attendance, participation, coursework, and tests, students received certificates of attendance.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of a course modality on perceived teaching effectiveness of an English as an additional language (EAL) course for adults. The following research questions (RQ) were formulated:

- RQ 1: Does a modality affect students' perceptions of their experience in a course?
 RQ 2: Considering that the course alumni are expert educators, what were their opinions of using different modalities in teaching and learning?

The research focused on three cohorts of adult students. The students were RTU faculty and academic staff taking courses in English as an additional language (EAL) within an EU-funded project [8.2.2.0/18/A/017 Rīgas Tehniskās universitātes akadēmiskā personāla stiprināšana stratēģiskās specializācijas jomās](#) (Strengthening Academic Staff of Riga Technical University in Areas of Strategic Specialization) between 2019 and 2022. As the students were university academics, it was assumed that they all had a similarly high level of education and interests, as well as well-developed learning habits. Each cohort received a course of the same volume of 100 academic hours, the same content and core textbooks per corresponding level, and was taught by the same senior instructors. Students were placed in groups of a maximum 12 participants according to their initial level of English as defined by an internal RBS ELC placement test. In all three cohorts the instruction was organized at B1+, B2, B2+, and C1 levels according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR] (Council of Europe, 2020). Table 1 illustrates the composition of the research sample.

There were four full-time instructors working with these students, two of them native speakers, all of them qualified to teach at all levels, and all working at RBS ELC longer than ten years. While groups at C1 level were always assigned to a native speaker, allocation of other groups was based on the individual instructors' preferences.

Table 1
Research Sample

Academic Year	Modality	Number of Enrolled Students/Number of Training Groups	Gender	
			Male	Female
2019-2020	F2F	59/5	28	31
2020-2021	Online	42/4	15	30
2021-2022	Blended	67/6	32	35

Note: Gender identities were assumed based on the participants' names. The fact that they were university academics was presumed as their defining demographic characteristic in the context of this research, thus no demographic data was collected.

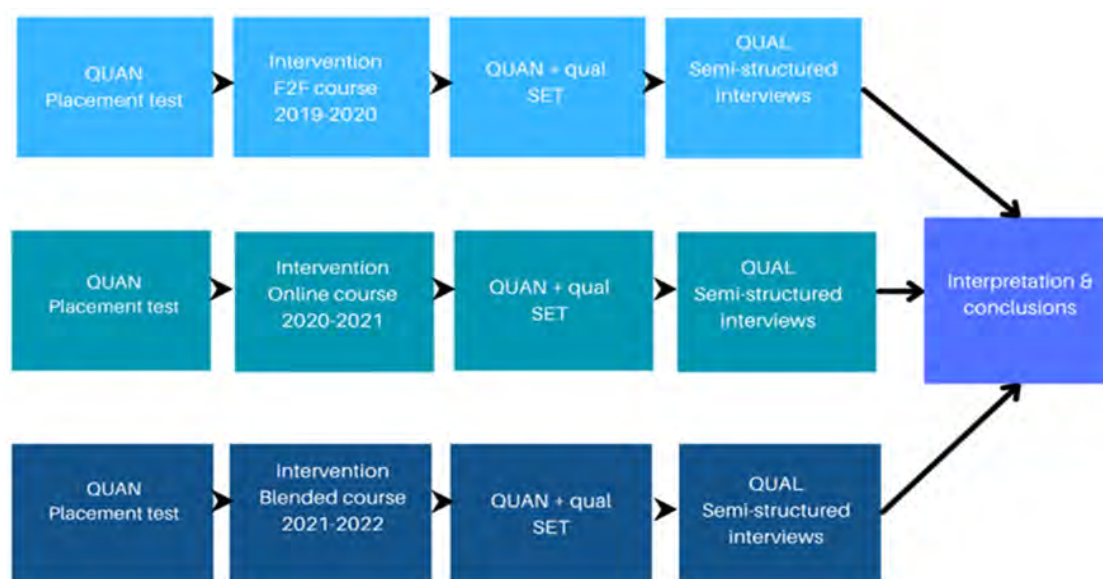
Research Design

This research was meant to inform practice, so a pragmatic paradigm (Creswell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2019) was chosen. Developed by Dewey, it has always focused on what works in practice (Burch, 2022; Dewey, 1916; Moore, 1966). According to Frey (2018), “pragmatism emphasizes that research involves decisions about which goals are most meaningful and which methods most suitable” (p.3). This is consistent with applying pluralistic methodology (Clarke & Visser, 2019; Pring, 2015), which characterizes mixed method. The use of mixed methods is increasingly gaining popularity among researchers (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Greene, 2007) despite being relatively recent.

As illustrated in Figure 2, students’ perceptions were investigated in a quasi-experimental design with a modality as an independent variable and using sequential mixed method research. Although students could choose whether to participate in a course, the choice of modality was defined by external factors, such as epidemiological situation and legislation. Therefore, students’ assignment to a modality could not be randomized. Other factors affecting students’ experience were controlled: student demographics, course content and volume, methodology, materials, as well as instructors who taught the course.

Figure 2

Research Design (developed by T. Ginzburg)



Note: QUAN stands for the quantitative method, QUAN + qual – for the mainly quantitative with some qualitative part; QUAL – for the qualitative method.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

The data for answering RQ 1 were collected through SETs, which represented standard RBS ELC final evaluation forms. They contained 26 Likert-scale questions about the instructor and various aspects of a course. The survey used values from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) rather than 1 to 5 to avoid a neutral response. Historically, a mean value of 3.33 in each

item was a threshold for a course to be considered satisfactory. Additionally, the forms contained an open-ended question about general impressions and suggestions for improvement; however, not all students wrote comments. The survey was administered anonymously on the last day of the course. In the 2019-2020 academic year, 43 students finished the course. The forms were given as hard copies, and 30 (70%) students filled them out. In the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years, the questionnaire was distributed as Google Forms. All the enrolled online students (100%) finished the course, and 34 (81%) filled out the forms. In the 2021- 2022 academic year, 65 students finished the course and 53 (81.5%) students filled out the questionnaire. Mean values for each item on the SET for each cohort were calculated and a one-way ANOVA test was performed to learn whether the differences were significant using IBM SPSS 22. When analysing the results, practical significance of potential differences (Hair Jr et al., 2010) was considered. Statistically significant differences in values could be disregarded provided the values were sufficiently above the historical threshold of 3.33. Additionally, the comments in the open-ended questions were examined for content and the main codes defined.

A series of semi-structured interviews with the course participants a year after the course ended were conducted to answer RQ 2. The invitation to participate was sent out to all the course participants via e-mail. Four students who took a F2F course and were enrolled in the blended one at the time, and five students from the online course agreed. The questions focused on the following: motivation in taking the course and whether it changed over time; general opinion of the course, its organization, and participants; whether the course had any effect on the way they use English; their opinion on what the optimal delivery system was. Although the information reached saturation after the eighth interview, all nine were conducted. Eight interviews were conducted in-person; one respondent was out of the country at the time, so that interview was conducted over Zoom. All the interviews were conducted in English, recorded, anonymized, transcribed, and the transcripts verified by the respondents. The researchers analysed the transcripts separately for the F2F/blended students and online students following the approach recommended by various researchers (Creswell, 2007; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Kvale, 1996) which includes multiple reading of transcripts, identifying initial categories and classifying them to arrive at common themes.

Ethical Considerations

RTU administration responsible for the project gave their written permission to use the SETs for the research. The permission for the interviews was obtained from the University of Latvia Ethics Commission (Nr 71- 46/19). The titles of the coursebooks used for instruction are not provided to avoid promoting the publishers.

Findings

SET Analysis

Analysis of SETs compared students' perceptions of the course delivered via three modalities and provided the answer to RQ 1. For convenience, 26 survey items were grouped into categories. Table 2 presents the first group comprising half of the 26 questions. This group of queries related specifically to instructors.

Table 2

Summary of Student Responses about the Instructor

The instructor	F2F		Online		Blended	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Speaks loudly and clearly enough to hear	3.90	.31	3.94	.24	3.85	.50
Knows the subject well	4.00	.00	4.00	.00	3.89	.47
Answers questions well	3.83	.38	3.97	.17	3.83	.51
Acts politely and respectfully, showing interest and patience	3.93	.25	3.97	.17	3.91	.37
Returns tests and homework not later than after one class	3.87	.35	3.85	.36	3.75	.55
Will provide extra help when asked	3.93	.25	3.94	.24	3.79	.53
Gives enough feedback on assignments and tests	3.93	.25	3.82	.24	3.79	.47
Begins and ends class on time	3.97	.18	3.82	.39	3.79	.50
Is well-prepared for the class	3.90	.31	3.88	.33	3.91	.45
Is interesting and enthusiastic	3.87	.35	3.97	.17	3.85	.50
Is skillful in promoting class/group discussions	3.80	.41	3.88	.33	3.75	.55
Gives all students the chance to participate	3.87	.35	3.88	.33	3.83	.51
Is one whom I'd like to have again in a future class*	3.93	.25	3.94	.24	3.67	.68

Note: *A one-way ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference in mean scores between at least two groups ($F(2, 113) = [4.170]$, $p = .02$). Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons revealed that the mean scores are significantly different between F2F and blended ($p = .04$, 95% C.I. = [.01, .51]) and between online and blended ($p = .029$, 95% C.I. = [.02, .51]).

The values for all three cohorts were close, which indicated that a modality did not impact how students perceived instructors. Even though the differences in mean scores for the last item were revealed as statistically significant, they were not practically significant. Larger SDs signaled that the opinions of the students in the blended course were more disparate.

The next group of questions related to teaching resources. Table 3 summarizes students' responses related to the quality of the materials employed in a particular course.

Table 3
Summary of Student Responses About the Resources

The textbook and teaching materials	F2F		Online		Blended	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Are interesting and relevant	3.37	.62	3.24	.51	3.35	.59
Are useful to the class	3.47	.57	3.41	.68	3.46	.61
Have helped me to understand the course material	3.63	.49	3.41	.66	3.45	.54
The online resources						
Are interesting and relevant	3.80	.41	3.56	.50	3.64	.52
I use them regularly	3.50	.57	3.29	.72	3.19	.83
I use them only to know homework*	2.10	1.03	2.82	.81	2.66	.83
I use extra activities posted	3.57	.50	3.26	.62	3.33	.71

Note: A one-way ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference in mean scores between at least two groups ($F(2, 113) = [5.864], p = .004$). Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons revealed that the mean scores are significantly different between F2F and online ($p = .009$, 95% C.I. = [-1.28, -.15]) and between F2F and blended ($p = .036$, 95% C.I. = [-1.09, -.03]).

The students rated electronic resources more highly than textbooks. As textbooks are less likely to reflect the latest topics of interest, this is understandable. F2F students' admission to using online resources more often could be due to the fact that for them those were only supplementary, while for online and blended students they were part of the core materials selected or created by teachers based on what they considered the needs of the students to be. These included authentic online materials (news reports, TED-talks, YouTube videos), online learning materials available on professional websites, as well as other materials and quizzes created by teachers.

The next part of the questionnaire pertained to homework, which was assigned after every class. Table 4 represents the summary of students' responses.

Table 4
Summary of Student Responses About Homework

The homework	F2F		Online		Blended	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Has goals that are clearly explained by the instructor	3.77	.43	3.65	.49	3.68	.47
Is useful in helping me to understand the course material	3.77	.43	3.79	.41	3.68	.47

The final part of the SET, summarized in Table 5, addressed students' general impressions of the course. It was of special interest to the management, as students would only return to the course or recommend it if they saw value in the program.

Table 5*Summary of Student Responses about General Reaction to the Course*

My general reaction to the course	F2F		Online		Blended	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
I learned a great deal	3.60	.50	3.62	.55	3.64	.52
The instructor was good	3.93	.25	3.97	.17	3.89	.32
I would like to continue studying at RBS ELC	3.83	.38	3.73	.52	3.70	.53
I would recommend this course to others	3.83	.38	3.91	.29	3.79	.47

While the scores for the instructors partially reflected the ones expressed in Table 2, the values for the last two items showed slightly less preference for the blended modality. The SET quantitative results as well as students' comments confirm that students' evaluation of their own progress correlated with their overall satisfaction. This confirmed the validity of using SETs as an instrument of assessing teaching effectiveness discussed in Willits and Brennan (2017).

Overall SET results demonstrated a tendency to prefer learning electronically. This contrasted perceptions of RBS ELC regular adult students, who studied in the evenings in the same academic years, in groups of the same levels of language proficiency (B1+, B2, B2+, C1), and paid a tuition fee. Past surveys of RBS ELC students, which included age, gender, level of education, and reasons for studying English (data unavailable) allowed them to be considered as demographically comparable to the students in this research. Analysis of their SETs showed a preference for the blended modality, with online rated the lowest (Ginzburg & Daniela, 2022). Considering the barriers to participation in adult education (Cross, 1992), the only resource the students in this research spent was time, as their course was funded by the project, while RBS ELC students had to invest both time and money. Thus, the students in this research could have prioritized their time and utilized the opportunity to save it that virtual teaching and learning provides. That might explain the difference in SET results. The impact of the source of funding on students' perceptions of training could be useful to investigate in future.

Comments from the Open-Ended Question

Analysis of the comments allowed them to be grouped into several codes. Table 6 lists them.

Table 6*Main Codes from Comments to SETs and Their Frequencies for Each Modality*

Code	F2F (N1=52)		Online (N2=19)		Blended (N3=28)	
	n 1	%	n 2	%	n 3	%
Great instructor	14	26.92	8	42.11	9	32.14
No suggestions	5	9.62	4	21.05	5	17.86
Everything was great	13	25.00	4	21.05	2	7.14
Thank you	10	19.23	4	21.05	5	17.86
More discussions	4	7.69	1	5.26	0	0
Textbooks were outdated	3	5.77	2	10.53	1	3.57
Instructor-curated materials were good	3	5.77	1	5.26	1	3.57
More topics related to academic life	3	5.77	0	0	1	3.57
Online classes	0	0	2	10.53	2	7.14

Note: N1, N2, N3 – the total number of utterances in SETs per respective modality. n 1, n 2, n 3 – number of respective codes' appearances per modality.

Most comments students in all the modes chose to make were related to instructors. In the quotes below, instructors' names written by students are represented by the initial.

“Great instructor! Thanks a lot!”

“K. is a great lecturer, highly talented. The best explanations I have ever heard. He manages to explain logic and essence of rules and does it perfectly. Thank you!” (F2F).

“J. is the BEST!!!!”

“K. is fantastic teacher” (Online).

“My teacher was Excellent!”

“Thanks! The instructor-our dear teacher - does not need to improve anything. He is an ideal creative teacher who skilfully uses even the psychological aspect to activate and interest the group” (Blended).

This code is more frequent in a blended modality than in F2F, which is opposite to the value of “The instructor is good” in Table 5. This further confirmed that the differences in mean values were not significant.

Students' general satisfaction with their experience is further seen from “No suggestions”, “Everything was great”, and “Thank you” codes. Their high frequencies confirm that this opinion characterizes all three modalities. The sample utterances included: “The course was

really great! Thank you!” (F2F). “Difficult to imagine, overall, it is more than expected!” (Online). “Everything was brilliant.” (Blended).

Some of the respondents wrote that they prefer materials prepared or curated by instructors to textbooks.

“I really enjoyed video materials. The video on forms of carbon was inspiring, especially as we need to make videos in our chemistry lessons. This video was awe-inspiring” (F2F).

“The textbook is a bit outdated, especially texts related to technologies.”

“Summaries of the various grammar topics etc. prepared by J. were great, very comprehensive and excellently formatted” (Online).

“The instructor's K. examples and explanations were often more understandable, correct and useful than the topics presented in the textbook.”

These corroborate quantitative results of the SETs, which show that teacher-created or -curated materials were rated higher than textbooks (see Table 3).

Some comments mentioned discussions and topics related to scientific and academic work.

“It would be great to add more scientific topics to the course.”

“More technical English.” (F2F).

“The tough time limits do not allow us to devote enough time for discussions” (Online).

“Some examples of daily professor life with students could be helpful” (Blended).

Some respondents emphasized the benefits of studying online.

“Online classes is a great opportunity to save time on the transportation (getting to the class and back).” (Online).

“In my opinion, RBS should not give up the idea of organizing classes online.” (Blended).

One online student provided a more detailed opinion:

As concerns the online format, it was indeed a great opportunity to study English during the Covid time when there aren't a lot of things happening around, so it was possible to invest more time in studying compared to the non-Covid life. ... While the breakout groups seem a very good format for online interaction, sometimes I missed collaboration with the whole group. I am not sure though if and how this could be tackled online. (Online).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Conducting semi-structured interviews followed the recommendations to complement SETs with alumni' and experts' opinions (Kulik, 2001; Ulker, 2021). The responses provided information regarding using different modalities in teaching and learning which answers RQ 2. The alumni who agreed to be interviewed formed two categories in terms of their teaching experience. One out of the four people from both F2F and blended courses had fewer than 10 years of experience while three had 21 and more. Of five interviewees who took an online course, four had taught for less than 10 years, and one had 21 or more years of experience. Table 7 represents the main themes identified from the interviews.

Table 7

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 analysis of the themes below respondents are coded S1, F2F/Blended –the first interviewed student who attended the F2F and Blended courses; S1, Online – the first interviewed student from an Online course; S2, Online – the second interviewed student from an Online course and so on.

Motivation to Study

Students from all the modalities wanted to improve English:

“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).

Others wanted more speaking practice:

I felt that I needed, especially the speaking part. Because in my field, I know how to write good sentences because I may be writing very short and use only grammar which I know is correct. But the verbal expression... I think it's something different and separate from written parts. (S2, F2F/Blended).

“I wanted to improve, especially grammar, I think” (S2, Online). “I wanted to improve my English because I work with foreign students and it's important to talk correctly” (S3, Online).

Socializing was another motivational factor, especially for students from an 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).

“I think it's normal to know English nowadays. It's like something that makes me more human if I speak in English” (S5, Online).

The fact that the course was free also played a role in their motivation:

“Because of this unique opportunity, you have a project, you know, with everything paid” (S1, F2F/Blended).

“Actually, it was for free. And I wanted to improve all my English. Still would like to improve.” (S2, Online).

Effect of the Course

A year after the course, many respondents mentioned improvement. Some felt it especially in the areas of grammar and syntax:

“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).

They also reported feeling more confident using English:

“To explain my opinion directly to people I needed. ... You can develop this ability and find that no one will kill you if you use some wrong words or something like that” (S2, F2F/Blended).

“... to remember all perfect and continuous tenses. It’s not possible. But now it's so interesting. Maybe I will read lectures once more. 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).

“I started to focus maybe a little bit more on grammar” (S2, Online).

“I think my level of English has improved. ... maybe I don't find writing easier now but at least I know where I should stop and think if this is correct or not” (S4, Online).

“I started to speak more grammatically correct” (S5, Online).

Spooren and Christiaens (2017) argued that students who believe in the value of SETs tend to give higher scores. However, a year after they finished the course, the respondents’ opinions confirmed SET results, which were high and similar across the modalities. This further asserts the validity of using SETs as an instrument of evaluating teaching effectiveness.

Effect of the Teacher

Although not asked specifically, all the interviewees spoke about the role of a teacher and their teachers:

“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).

“He is very well-trained in pedagogical aspect and uses psychological aspect. Perfectly! He knows how... he feels our mood. Where did you find that wonderful person?” (S3, 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 mentioned sociolinguistic learning as an added value:

“And yes, J. was a very nice teacher. I got quite a lot interesting information about English people, and society. So, it was also interesting from that point” (S3, Online).

The SET items related to teachers received the highest values from students, and most comments in an open-ended question were also about teachers. Moreover, all the interviewees spoke about their teachers even though they were not prompted. On the one hand, that reaffirmed the central role of teachers, their personalities and behaviour students’ perception of their experience as argued by Willits and Brennan (2017). On the other hand, since the

students are educators, the high scores may not have been a consequence of a halo effect as described in Allred et al. (2022). Besides, in non-formal adult education there is no incentive to inflate grades, which was a concern Lee and Deale (2019) expressed regarding using SETs in university education.

The group of themes addressing aspects of teaching via different modalities was especially important, as it provides insights into the new teaching format developed in 2020. It incorporated two main elements compared to the traditional F2F method: a flipped classroom and a synchronous online component. Even though interviews were about a language course, the respondents often spoke as educators, commenting on their experience with their own students.

Advantages of F2F

Both groups of respondents mentioned that people are social beings, and they need non-verbal clues to communicate successfully as the main argument for F2F instruction:

Because it [language] is a social instrument, the instrument to communicate, you can't be in society without a direct contact. It is impossible. ... Because you see the person, you see the emotion, you see the group. Because the group is asking questions, and so you follow the questions, you're trying to understand why this guy is asking this question (S1, F2F/Blended).

“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).

Advantages of Online

Both groups had experience with an online language classroom either as an entire course or in part, as was the case with a blended course. Most positive comments from F2F/Blended students were related to the absence of noise when doing group work in the Zoom breakout rooms:

Actually, I enjoy it a lot because I can freely discuss the questions with some of other colleagues. ... And there is no other noise because in class when you have this small groups, there is too much noise, and I can't concentrate (S2, 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).

Feeling safe to make mistakes was mentioned as another advantage of breakout rooms:

Because if I don't understand how to do something, well, I can ask a colleague. And if we both cannot get the idea, we just wait for J. and then ask and it stays with us, and then J. gives his feedback to everyone after this small exercise in the word format. He shows the correct variant, and he never mentions who made the error. ... But in class, everyone will look at you and it's something I don't like. (S2, F2F/Blended).

“I really like that in this virtual breakout room, there are three of us, online: the teacher and us” (S4, Online).

For most respondents from the online course convenience was the main advantage of this method:

“...this online teaching fit well for me at that time” (S2, Online).

“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).

“I think the fact that it was from the comfort of my home and my coach, it also helped. ... I'm not sure I would have been able to attend all of the classes if they happened somewhere” (S4, Online).

“I really liked the online course because then I am at home in my safe place in my room with my mug of tea or coffee, and I feel more comfortable”. (S5, Online).

Issues with Online

The biggest of these seemed to be the fact that focusing requires extra effort from both a student and a teacher:

“So, you see the faces, but sometimes you see somebody's drinking tea or coffee. It's good, no objections. But nevertheless, it means that you are un-focusing, so and the group is also un-focusing” (S1, F2F/Blended).

“I as a teacher, feel that they are not as concentrated on lectures online as a face-to-face” (S2, F2F/Blended).

“... 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).

Another factor mentioned by Online students was the need to be comfortable with technology and to have no distractions:

“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).

Convenience of online classes was obviously appreciated. At the same time, students evidently valued communication in the Zoom breakout rooms as it provides comfort and the feeling of safety. This confirmed the findings of Lazarevic and Bentz (2021) on lower levels of stress perceived by students in an online mode. At the same time, the stated challenge of the pressure to stay focused when studying and teaching electronically confirmed the conclusion by Brachtl et al. (2023) that an online modality is best suited for adult students. On the other hand, the social nature of language learning discussed in Firth and Wagner (2007) and generally in education was confirmed by the value the respondents placed on social interactions.

Flipped Classroom

Respondents from both groups thought positively of the flipped classroom model:

“Yeah, I prefer this pre-class because I can do it when I have time ... when I have some pause in work, for example, I can do this online exercise, and check results. I like that” (S2, Online).

“Yeah, yeah, as pre-class, it's really great ... Yeah, I try getting into this topic and it's really good. Yeah, and it goes faster. I have some questions and they will be answered by the teacher” (S4, F2F/Blended).

“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).

Optimal Variant

All the respondents were asked which approach they thought was optimal. Most sounded confident:

“Definitely face-to-face. Definitely” (S1, F2F/Blended).

“100% for blended. Because, if one face-to-face is more with grammar, I think it's enough ... and the next class is just speaking. It's perfect, and it can be online and you feel very comfortable there” (S2, F2F/Blended).

“...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 we have optimal now. ... Yeah, blended. And I said it's good to meet every second time. Yeah, for saving time” (S4, F2F/Blended).

Three out of five students from an online course also named blended as the best variant while the other two said they could only comment on what they had experienced:

I would say that for adult learners who are coming to these classes with the understanding that they really need it, they really want to do it, I would say that this

distance learning style is quite good and actually can completely replace contact hours. This blended learning I would say is even better. Because, yes, we are social things. It's better to come and listen and to see the group. And even for instructors, it is necessary from time to time to see what is happening, to see these faces and to see the feedback on the faces (S1, Online).

“I think probably this blended variant is the best one” (S2, Online).

“I think the third one, blended. Yes” (S3, Online).

“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).

Thus, six out of nine respondents considered the blended format to be optimal for adult students. This supported the assertions that different modalities increase flexibility of delivery, online and blended courses should be carefully planned, and flipped classroom suits adult students (Ahlin, 2021; Chen et al., 2014; Gacs et al., 2020). However, there was a difference between the opinions expressed by respondents as students and those when they move into the role of educators. As students, they expressed a slight preference for the online methodology, which might have been related to the convenience of an online course.

Overall, the results showed that mature students appreciate the flexibility a flipped classroom provides. This is also illustrated in SET values for online and blended modalities, which incorporated flipped classroom, being higher than those for the F2F which is considered a “golden standard” for language teaching. Moreover, high completion rates (72.9% in F2F, 100% in Online, 97% in Blended) and the interviewees' opinions that their motivation did not change over the course confirm that students think it aids learning and can be implemented in adult education.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the research into adult students' perceptions of different modalities in three ways. Firstly, it focuses on adult students. Secondly, it is based on comparable data: students' demographics, course content, volume, and core teaching materials, instructors, with a modality as a single independent variable. Thirdly, it combines SETs with opinions of alumni who are also experts, thus providing a comprehensive view.

The results indicated that a language course could be successfully delivered using any of the modalities provided it is properly developed. Flipped blended format was considered optimal by the respondents as it incorporated F2F and online as well as synchronous and asynchronous components. Besides, it easily transformed into fully flipped online format when the circumstances demanded it. That indicates the potential to reduce barriers to participation in education for adult students and the flexibility for adult educators to plan their courses.

The findings also reinforced the essential role teachers play in education, including adult language education. Thus, teachers need to be trained in methodology and approaches of teaching F2F, online, and in blended modalities, as well as flipped classroom. Moreover, since adult language education differs from teaching other age groups, special training programs for adult language teachers might be feasible.

The results show that research findings regarding suitability of online, blended, and flipped learning in university education are applicable to adult education. Finally, the consistency of alumni' and students' opinions of their experience validated using SETs as an efficient instrument for evaluating teaching effectiveness in adult education.

Limitations of Research

The research focused on the mode of delivery in a language course controlling for other factors. Thus, it did not address English language teaching methodology, teaching materials, teachers' qualifications, and students' characteristics. It is possible that less motivated students or the ones with a lower level of education would respond to the modalities differently. Less experienced teachers may also need support in selecting and curating supplementary materials or adapting commercial ones to the needs of their students. However, considering that research was focused on comparing the same teachers, content, and materials this should not impact the general implication of research conclusions.

Recommendations for Further Research

Students in this research were motivated adults who chose to participate in the course. Similar quasi-experiments applying the same formats to teaching additional languages to university students would be recommended. Considering that two groups of demographically comparable students with different sources of funding for training demonstrated slightly different results, further research into the impact of economic factors on students' perception of their experience might be another avenue of inquiry.

Comparing learning outcomes of a course taught using three different approaches would add to the research into teaching effectiveness. In the case of adult language learners, long-term outcomes reflecting retention of knowledge would be preferable. This could be measured by a standardized language proficiency test administered after the completion of a course.

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