

Lessons learned during COVID-19: Towards blended learning and teaching in LINC and ESL

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ESL and LINC teachers and programs were shifted abruptly to online and blended teaching as COVID-19 closed physical classrooms in March 2020. In this article, we look back at some of the resulting changes in ESL/LINC teaching and learning due to COVID-19. We examine the growing shift towards blended learning that occurred because of pandemic restrictions, as well as its significance for blended delivery and implications for ESL and LINC teachers, teacher training and education, students, programs, and further research.

These findings were first presented and discussed with ESL and LINC teachers during our presentation (Cummings & Fayed, 2021) at the TESL Ontario Conference in November 2021. The findings came to light during our development of a publication project which led to the handbook *Teaching in the Post COVID-19 Era* (Fayed & Cummings, 2021) begun in Spring 2020 and published in December 2021 by Springer Publishing. This handbook aimed to document the global challenges, teaching practices, and innovations related to pedagogical planning and course delivery that were developed because of COVID-19. Early in March 2020 as teachers and students were required to stay home because of the worsening pandemic, we (Fayed & Cummings, 2021) questioned what we, as educators, could do to help other teachers and students. We started working on this publication project that eventually turned into a full handbook showcasing the extraordinary responses that educators made to navigate their way through the pandemic. This scholarly text discusses valuable innovations for teaching and learning in times of a crises like COVID-19 and beyond. Based on 73 chapters, case studies, and contributions from educators in more than 30 countries worldwide, the handbook examines effective teaching models and methods, technology innovations and enhancements, strategies for engagement of learners, unique approaches to teacher education and leadership, and also important counseling models and mental health support for students. In this article, we focus on those findings and experiences relevant to ESL and LINC students and teachers. Significant changes in teaching and learning were noted – mainly, an increasing uptake of blended learning/teaching as a frequent mode of delivery. Here we discuss this shift towards blended delivery and the changes in teaching approaches



needed to navigate blended teaching. We also anticipate implications for the ongoing development of ESL and LINC teaching/learning as we continue teaching in a *new normal* post COVID-19.

Background: Blended learning

It is first important to explain what we mean by blended learning (BL) before launching into discussion of its increased uptake during and post-COVID.

Blended learning (sometimes also referred to as hybrid learning) combines online interactions and resources with traditional in-class delivery. BL requires some physical presence of both teachers and students with elements of student control over time, learning path, or place. Generally, the type of blend may happen differently according to different institutions, times, and even activity levels (Graham, 2009). Watson (2008) described a five-stage continuum of blended learning with Stage I representing fully online instruction with options for some face-to-face (F2F) instruction; Stage II is mainly online with some time in the classroom or computer lab; Stage III is mostly or fully online with students meeting daily in the classroom or computer lab; Stage IV provides classroom instruction with substantial components online that extend beyond the classroom; and, Stage V is classroom instruction that includes online resources with limited or no requirements for students to be online. Each stage represents a different way of combining online and F2F instruction between the provision of fully online instruction with optional F2F to the fully in-class with additional online resources beyond the physical and/or virtual classroom.

Other modes of BL include hyflex where *hybrid* and *flexible* are combined. In this case, students may be given a choice in how they participate in the course (in the physical classroom or remotely) and engage with material in the mode that works best for them over the course and from session to session.

Towards blended learning and teaching

The significant shift towards blended learning was the immediate result of the constraints imposed by COVID-19 requiring ESL and LINC programs to transition to remote synchronous delivery and live online classes via virtual video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and Microsoft Teams rather than physical classrooms. We know that since March 2020 there has been a large upswing in blended learning in ESL and LINC. Sturm et al. (2021) noted the extent of this shift towards blended learning based on the increased need for instructor training for blended teaching. The Avenue-LearnIT2teach project, which develops and provides the blended learning teacher training for online and blended learning and the learning management system platform and course resources and activities for learners, saw “286 new teachers...added to BL training by the end of March 2020 alone; and an additional 226 new teachers from April to June 2020” (Sturm, 2021, p. 596). The true shift in this case was the dramatic transition from



mainly F2F *on the ground* delivery in physical classrooms supplemented with a *blend* with some online and remote synchronous delivery (RSD) to fully online delivery with increased use of remote delivery via video conferencing platforms and classrooms in Zoom and Google. Sturm (2021, p. 594) explained that “the [original] teacher training, learner courseware, and support materials were designed for BL, that is teachers supplementing their in-person classes with online activities” from Avenue-LearnIT2teach. However, COVID-19 and closures of physical classrooms meant teachers “needed to use the learner courseware 100% online (OL)” with some synchronous video conferences/classes (Sturm, 2021, p. 594). Sturm noted that the Avenue-LearnIT2teach project found that in programs “where courseware had already been used for BL, a sudden shift to OL was easier than in other programs where many teachers decided to take the training and use the learner courseware, but some opted for other OL solutions like Google classroom instead” (Sturm, 2021, p. 594).

Based on post-training survey results (Sturm et al., 2021), 263 teachers completed Stage 1 of the Avenue-LearnIT2teach training for blended teaching, 359 teachers completed Pre-Stage 2, and 96 teachers completed Stage 2 of the training to prepare for teaching online. This uptake represents a significant surge of 4.6 times (Stage 1), 5.4 times (Pre-Stage 2), and 6.8 times (Stage 2) times more than before the pandemic crisis prior to March 2020. After the introductory Stage 1 training, the Stage 2 training levels require teachers to use and adapt an online course for blended learning/teaching.

Many teachers continued to Stage 3 of the training where they created their own courses, and some to Stage 4 where they designed their own e-activities. Between March 15 and June 30, 2020, 538 new blended learning LINC courses were set up in the learner courseware. Of these, 338 were set up by teachers who were new to the training, or in a few cases, by teachers who restarted the training after a long absence. Enrollments of teachers in courses surged to 5,251 in the last two weeks of March, 2020 compared to 1,085 on average per month in the two months prior (Sturm et al., 2021).

This trend suggests more capacity building and readiness for BL are shaping the way among instructors and programs since COVID-19. By moving towards these alternate modes of delivery relied on and made popular by COVID-19, it is possible to revise and supplement many of our existing teaching dynamics in various dimensions. Since that time, we have learned a great deal about how to effectively go online and blend face-to-face classes with asynchronous online activities. For example, many educators have shifted from introducing quizzes or tests to measure learning to using alternative assessments, online projects, virtual office hours and conferencing to support learners and assess their achievements.



LINC and ESL teachers quickly transitioned to a blend of synchronous teaching/learning via virtual classrooms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams combined with asynchronous online teaching/learning activities. The move to blended learning has been extensive. During the TESL Ontario 2021 Conference (November 4, 2021), we heard from LINC and ESL instructors who participated in our presentation regarding *Blended learning post COVID-19: An informed approach* (Cummings & Fayed, 2021). They confirmed their increasing move to BL in their responses to our questions and in the chat during the session, and also noted that in many cases, virtual and blended teaching/learning continue to be the norm for many ESL and LINC classes post COVID-19.

In September 2022, when questioned about the ongoing status of uptake of Avenue-LearnIT2teach BL training by instructors, Sturm (2022) reported that the trend towards blended teaching and learning has continued beyond COVID closures even though many LINC and ESL programs were allowed to return to their physical sites and classrooms by Fall 2021. The demand for training in blended learning by instructors and programs continues. Robert McBride, Executive Director of Avenue-LearnIT2teach, reports: “In November 2020 we installed a stats package on Avenue.ca and have been tracking the constant incremental uptake of teacher participation in BL training ever since. As of October 2022, there are over 50,000 accounts, of which about 13,000 are active during any 30-day window as compared to the 1,000 that were active before Covid” (2022). The pandemic resulted in what appears to be an unforeseen shift towards blended teaching and delivery in LINC and ESL.

McBride also points out the significant expansion and additional elements added to the Avenue-LearnIT2teach BL training for instructors in response to demands since Covid. “We launched Zoom webinars early in the pandemic to address training gaps. There are now almost 50 of them archived on our project portal (www.learnit2teach.ca), and we continue to roll out new ones at the rate of at least one per month” (2022). Another significant enhancement to Avenue-LearnIT2teach training has been the set up of the teacher-only discussion forum on Avenue.ca. McBride explains: “Every teacher is automatically enrolled and this teacher discussion forum has become a lively environment for sharing problems and comments. Posts are monitored by our trainers and responded to promptly” (2022).

At the time of the TESL Ontario Conference in November 2021, instructors noted that a number of their programs continued to rely on blended delivery with synchronous video classes blended with asynchronous online activities and learning or F2F *on the ground* classes supplemented with asynchronous online activities and synchronous video conferencing. For example, Newcomer Peel Programs in Ontario followed this model which combines virtual F2F classes via video conferencing with online asynchronous activities and tasks.



Other ESL and LINC programs went back to in person classes in the physical classroom by Fall 2021; however, continued to provide blended online asynchronous activities beyond face-to-face class time. Some classes provided classes every day, but alternated days on which some groups of students would attend in person and some would participate online from home.

When and how to blend learning

The big question that remains for teachers is when to use F2F activities in the classroom—whether it be *seated* on the ground classes or a virtual classroom like Zoom—and when and how to provide asynchronous online activities outside the classroom—discussions, blogs, video presentations...and other online tasks and resources.

The University of Buffalo recommends three resources for blended teaching, that is, using seated F2F instruction in the physical classroom, asynchronous online learning, and remote course delivery modes via video conferencing. This model provides hybrid or BL by combining elements from these three delivery modes. Key components to plan for in each delivery mode include the pacing of instructions, content delivery and opportunities for practice, technologies, resources to share, and how to manage discussions.

The seated or physical classroom and virtual classroom where interaction amongst students and teacher(s) is mainly synchronous maximizes the necessary teaching presence and opportunities for social connections and development of community (e.g., social presence) for effectiveness in BL (Garrison et al., 2000; Fiock, 2020; Picciano, 2017); whereas in asynchronous online delivery modes that is not necessarily the case. In online delivery which is usually asynchronous by nature, independent learning is maximized through self-paced learning modules and activities. In that case, students need to have strengths in self-management and organization skills to be able to effectively manage asynchronous learning on their own. Based on instructors' choices, specific resources and technologies for each mode need to be considered and heavily utilized for teaching and learning. These many factors require extensive consideration by LINC and ESL teachers seeking to maximize blended learning for and with their students.

An example for blended learning in LINC and ESL

To clarify this further, let us consider how we could blend some sample tasks based on the LINC Level 5 curriculum. Students engage in a series of activities to learn and practice language related to workplace and employment law. They brainstorm problems in the workplace and learn how to give suggestions and advice. They do listening comprehension activities related to employment law. And, they read and discuss short case studies about workplace situations and problems to consider if laws have been upheld or violated.



Sample Tasks	LINC5
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In groups, discuss a list of problems in the workplace and give suggestions and advice. 2. Listen to a presentation about employment law in Ontario and identify the main points and most important details. 3. Read short case studies about workplace situations. Decide if workers' rights have been violated and how by referring to information in the Employment Standards Act. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Novice: Work in a group to prepare a PowerPoint presentation for the class to defend your decisions in Language Task 3. Skills: (PowerPoint) Create a Blank Presentation, Font, Font Alignment, Show a Presentation 4. Write about a situation where an employee's rights were violated. 	
Additional Tasks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Novice: Cut terms and paste beside definitions in a scrambled instructor-made file about vocabulary related to the Employment Standards Act. Skills: Open, Save, Cut, Paste, Drag and Drop 	
LINC 1-5	301

[\(Cummings & Fayed, TESL Ontario Conference 2021\)](#)

In preparing to teach such a lesson using a blended approach, there are a number of options for presenting and practicing these tasks. Teachers and programs choose from different modes, technologies, and activities based on what is best for their students' learning. For example, the warm up activity could be done as a brainstorming activity before class through an online discussion activity. This could be done in small groups or as a whole class; or, the teacher may decide to do the brainstorming in either the physical classroom virtual classroom via Zoom or Teams.

In the same way, you may decide to provide the listening activities online through audio case stories and questions or in the classroom or both—depending on the needs of your students and timing and program scheduling. Comprehension questions may be facilitated online through quizzes and Q & A online activities or in the classroom. And the presentations by students may be prepared and developed online by the student groups and uploaded for discussion and review by the whole class as video presentations online; or, you may decide that these presentations are best done in the classroom synchronously. Follow-up discussions may take place in the classroom and/or online. This means options and decisions need to be made by the teacher.

<p>Warm Up: Brainstorm employment problems</p> <p>Online Forum or F2F or Both</p>	<p>Listen to case stories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online activity and/or F2F in Zoom or the Physical Classroom 	<p>Comprehension Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OL: Quizzes, H5P, SCORM - F2F or Both F2F and OL 	<p>Discussion of Case Stories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • F2F or Online 	<p>Group Presentations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • F2F in physical class or F2F in virtual class or Video Presentations uploaded OL & Peer Review
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[\(Cummings & Fayed, TESL Ontario Conference 2021\)](#)



These multiple options speak at once to both the flexibility and advantages of a blended approach and its possible challenges. Teachers need to know the needs and strengths of their students, as well as to plan according to their students' availability to work synchronously in class or online asynchronously. Teachers also need and benefit from the instructor training and the blended learning activities and resources provided through Avenue-LearnIT2teach to efficiently and effectively implement blended learning. Significant amounts of time for planning are also required.

However, in spite of these heavy demands on teachers, BL has *taken off* in LINC and ESL since COVID-19 closed our physical classrooms and programs were required to adapt by providing blended and online learning. As noted by Sturm about the Avenue-LearnIT2teach project and the uptake of BL: "I would say that the trend [towards adopting BL] definitely continued with a few breaks in the summer months, especially after the first wave [of COVID] when many teachers probably just needed a break. We saw another significant surge [in teacher demand for training for blended learning/teaching] in the Fall of 2020 and continuous growth since then" (2022).

A demonstration research project, which investigated the effects of blended learning in LINC (Cummings et al., 2019) by studying blended learning classes, students, and instructors in real time prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, illuminated the many benefits of BL, as well as challenges. The ensuing report to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and stakeholders called for increased attention to blended learning/teaching in order to draw on the advantages of blended learning, including these important benefits documented in the research: increased student engagement; development of digital literacy learning (computer skills) and real world skills needed to manage the demands of jobs and daily life; support of learner autonomy and self-reflection; the capacity to provide more personalized learning for individual students leading to increased motivation; improved student attendance, engagement, and retention; flexibility and support of students' diverse schedules and responsibilities so they may attend to work and family demands while studying English; increased access to knowledge and information for students and teachers; support of teachers and teaching (Cummings et al., 2019, pp. 36–59). LINC instructor participants in that research project exclaimed support for BL. Their endorsement may be summed up by this quote from one of the instructors: "Blended learning transcends the classroom walls; it's engaging and creative; it connects[students and teachers] with the larger community; it breaks the potential of isolation of Traditional, classroom-based language learning; it's flexible. It's also sometimes challenging—as a teacher using this approach you have to update skills and knowledge continuously. You become a learner yourself, which I love" (Cummings et al., 2019, p. 63).

COVID-19 and our experiences with remote teaching have reinforced and strengthened that attention to and the uptake of blended learning considerably.



Implications and recommendations

In 2018, Shebansky noted that although “the integration of blended learning is well underway across diverse educational settings...There has been less interest, however, in examining the adoption of blended learning in English as a second language (ESL) contexts” (p. 52). COVID-19 has changed that trajectory, however. Therefore, in conclusion, we would like to highlight implications and recommendations in light of this trend towards embracing blended teaching/learning.

This is not an exhaustive list. We do propose here five top priority recommendations needed in order to prepare LINC and ESL teachers to adopt and implement blended learning effectively and to continue the momentum towards implementing the benefits of BL which COVID-19 hastened:

1. There needs to be continued development and promotion of instructor training and resources for blended learning/ teaching using innovative ways of BL delivery for both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Sturm (2021) highlighted: “The exponential increase in [BL] courses set up on the learner courseware site is a highly significant indicator in terms of the impact of the PD” (p. 600); Sturm also called for continued support and provision of both the formal PD training for BL and the more informal mentoring training and coaching provided during COVID-19 through the LiveHelp chat, email support, and teacher forums provided (p. 598). Sturm (2022), as well notes the need for standards for BL, plus ongoing training for leadership for administrators and lead teachers.
2. TESL teacher education and certification programs plus ongoing professional development programs will need to consider requiring courses and workshops (both theoretical and practice-based) focused on a blended approach. And the need to require inclusion of blended learning/teaching needs to be considered for the certification and re-certification of TESL programs. Teachers need to experience how to blend learning effectively and how to develop and co-ordinate BL activities and tasks. TESL practice-teaching courses and experience for ESL and LINC teacher candidates need to include experience and time in teaching in programs with practicum teacher partners and mentors who have already taken and implemented the Avenue-LearnIT2teach training for BL. TESL certificate programs and certification committees need to consider whether the Avenue-LearnIT2teach training for BL should be required for teacher candidates and how to best require and include that training.
3. Programs and funders need to recognize the increasing professional demands and time needed for teachers to effectively prepare for, plan and implement blended learning. There has been an ongoing call for support of teacher training and preparation for BL in the research and scholarly publications regarding BL (Costa et al., 2016; Cummings et al., 2019; Sturm, 2021). It is time now for programs and



funders to support BL teacher training and planning time.

4. In light of the benefits of BL for learners, that is, learning of necessary digital literacy skills while learning English and settlement skills and the flexibility of BL for meeting the scheduling needs of learners who have work and family responsibilities (Cummings et al., 2019, pp. 36–59), students too need to explore new dimensions and learning environments where the curriculum is no longer restricted to the physical borders or space of the classroom but rather expanded in time, time-zone, space, frequency, immersion and location. These opportunities for BL and classes need to be expanded and established and “more of the norm than the exception” by programs and funders.

5. More ongoing research examining the effects and best practices for BL is needed to study teaching practices that have developed during and past COVID-19 and the ongoing needs for BL delivery and teacher education.

As LINC and ESL stakeholders look toward a future of increased opportunities for flexible learning and teaching via blended approaches, it is time to increase attention to instructor training and blended learning resources, teacher education, funding and provision of time for professional development, and research.

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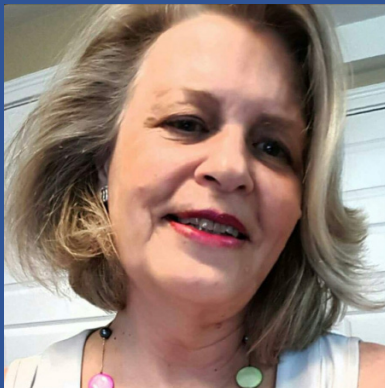
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