

# FLEXIBLE BLENDED LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF FILIPINO STUDENTS IN AN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) LEARNING CONTEXT

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## Abstract

The Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) outbreak has caused a sudden shift in many educational institutions to various alternative instructional methodologies. This pandemic has altered the traditional and typical strategies for teaching and learning environments. Marinduque State College (MSC), a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the province of Marinduque, has implemented Flexible Blended Learning (FBL) for Academic Year (A.Y.) 2020–2021. This descriptive research determined the FBL experiences of MSC students in an English language-learning context. The study results revealed that MSC students have an overall positive experience with FBL implemented in their English language class. Nevertheless, continuous support to meet the needs of the most vulnerable students, who cannot entirely keep abreast of the new learning system, must be prioritized. This may help mitigate the widening inequality among students with their right to equal learning opportunities.

**Keywords:** *Flexible blended learning; second language learning; Marinduque State College; Philippines*

## 1. Introduction

Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) outbreak has caused the sudden shift of many educational institutions to various instructional alternative methodologies. This pandemic has altered the traditional and typical strategies for teaching and learning environments.

As of April 28, 2020, based on the statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), around 1.3 billion learners at all levels from 186 countries, including more than 28 million learners in the Philippines, have been affected by the virus outbreak. As educational institutions have been temporarily closed, this has led educators and learners to study, work home-based and adopt virtual arrangements in the delivery of classes (UNESCO, 2020a). With the fast-growing and profound effects of the pandemic, educational institutions have decided to adopt the new normal. Several universities and colleges have agreed to implement individual policies regarding instruction and the opening of classes since August 2020 (Bagayas, 2020). Consequently, Commission on Higher Education (CHED) HEIs have implemented various alternative learning arrangements such as distance learning, e-learning, flexible learning, and other instructional modalities using technology. This scenario in the new normal has become a significant issue for HEIs in terms of ensuring the quality of higher education (UNESCO, 2020b).

Marinduque State College (MSC), a Higher Education Institution in the province of Marinduque, Philippines, has resorted to FBL as a significant response of the college to

ensure the continuance of the delivery of instruction amidst the academic challenges during the virus outbreak. This is in adherence to the directives of the CHED, which has been active in its response to provide equitable services to its students amid the pandemic. Purposive Communication is one of the core General Education language subjects of all the programs in MSC, which aims to enhance students' language proficiency. This study used the subject as the main English language-learning context. In that regard, this descriptive research was conducted to determine MSC students' FBL experiences in learning English in the new normal context of education.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Learning System in the Time of Pandemic**

At the height of the implementation of lockdowns and quarantine since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the Philippines was reported on January 30, 2020, the Commission on Higher Education Institutions (CHED) has still been active in its response to provide equitable services to its clientele. Several institutions, including the University of the Philippines (UP), Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University Taft, and Lyceum of the Philippines University, among others, canceled their online classes after weeks of its implementation (Bagayas, 2020). Some schools still employ the e-learning method to catch up on their curriculum, including MSC, the sole locale of this study. Meanwhile, the Department of Education (DepEd) has DepEd Commons, an online platform that helps public school teachers implement distance learning. Given the technical restrictions that have been experienced by many, only those teachers who have available resources and access to the internet are encouraged to employ distance learning arrangements using this platform (Bagayas, 2020). In response to the problems and constraints that education sectors have experienced during the implementation of the alternative learning arrangements during the second half of the academic year 2019-2020 for higher education institutions, CHED Chairperson, Prospero De Vera, recommended blended or flexible learning upon resumption of classes in August. Students with no internet access may attend face-to-face classes, while e-learning will be given to those with the necessary resources and stable connectivity. However, he clarified that the students should not receive the traditional instructional methodology. As part of the academic intervention plan for the upcoming academic year 2020-2021, teachers are encouraged to attend training and seminars regarding flexible learning to prepare and design their syllabi (CNN Philippines, 2020). Amid the pandemic, the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) has offered free online courses to train teachers in online teaching.

Moreover, Vibal Group, Inc. and Abiva Publishing House, Inc. are some of the leading integrated education and technology companies in the Philippines that have offered free webinars to capacitate educators in the "new normal" of education. With this, several higher educational institutions have opted to employ alternative learning arrangements in response to the current needs of the education sector in schools re-opening by August. Aside from considering the type of learning that shall be implemented for this upcoming academic year, the safety and protection, health, well-being, and social relations of the education sector shall also be prioritized. Such considerations include assessing and ensuring the readiness of the education system for school re-opening, continuity of learning, and system resilience to anticipate and deal with future crises (UNESCO, 2020c). Whereas, due to unforeseen conditions and an unpredictable state during the virus outbreak, up to this date, there has been no provision made for the resumption of face-to-face classes.

## 2.2 Flexible Blended Learning (FBL)

Flexible Blended Learning is a learning arrangement free from the limitations of time, place, and pace of study. FBL, as operationally defined, is a common term for flexible and blended types of instructional delivery. In consideration of the current situation in the province, MSC has implemented FBL with a restriction on face-to-face instruction. The college prefers to integrate FBL, focusing on utilizing both online and modular learning. Synchronous learning refers to the use of e-learning that requires the teachers and the students to be in the learning environment simultaneously. In this type of learning, classes usually happen via Zoom meetings, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and other e-learning platforms that allow interactive and collaborative scenarios between the teacher and the students. Synchronous learning is a more structured learning strategy where the courses are scheduled at designated class hours and in live virtual classroom settings. In this way, students benefit from real-time interactions and get instant messaging and feedback when needed (Littlefield, 2018, as cited by Huang et al., 2020).

On the other hand, asynchronous deals with more offline instructional delivery. Most of the time, electronic copies of modules and other learning materials, including audio-visual presentations of lectures, are uploaded or sent via learning platforms (like Google Classroom, Facebook Group, Website, etc.), where the students can access and download these learning materials anytime. Students in asynchronous learning cannot get instant feedback or messages. Additionally, the learning content is not provided in live classes but on different learning management systems or forums (Littlefield, 2018, as cited by Huang et al., 2020). For students residing in remote areas of the province where the stability of network signal and internet connection has been a major problem, full remote or modular learning is catered for in which the students are provided with printed copies of the modules.

## 3. Research Method

This mixed-method research determined and described the FBL experiences of selected Filipino students in an English as a Second Language (ESL) learning context. This study was conducted at Marinduque State College since the college has resorted to Flexible Blended Learning to ensure the continuance of classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study group for this research was taken from the schools that offered Purposive Communication, a General Education language subject, for the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The appropriate sample size for estimating the proportion of the population of the students who were enrolled in the said subject was determined within a five percent (5%) margin of error and a 95% confidence level. Upon determining the appropriate sample size from each school, the sampling method used in selecting the respondents was random sampling. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Office of the President of the College and the Dean of the School of Graduate Education and Professional Studies (SGEPS). A letter of consent to conduct the study was also given to the school deans prior to survey administration. Upon approval, the necessary data was gathered through the distribution of survey questionnaires to the research respondents.

Since the study was conducted in the midst of the pandemic, the gathering of data was done through an online survey. The online survey was administered via Google Forms to 297 students taking Purposive Communication for the second semester of A.Y. 2020-2021. Gathered data was subjected to statistical treatment such as frequency and percentage. The Four-Point Likert scale was used to determine the statistical description of the experiences

of MSC students during the implementation of FBL in their Purposive Communication subject and the challenges they encountered that affected their learning of the English language.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Flexible Blended Learning Experiences of ESL Filipino Students

#### 4.1.1 Mode of Delivery/ Instructional Modality

Mode of Delivery	Frequency	Percentage
Asynchronous	247	62.06 %
Synchronous	102	25.63 %
Modular (Printed Module)	49	12.31 %

Table 1. Mode of Delivery

With the implementation of Flexible Blended Learning, there are three modes of delivery for English classes (Purposive Communication Subject): asynchronous, synchronous, and modular. As detailed in Table 1, more than half (247, or approximately 62.06%) of the respondents experienced asynchronous learning, allowing the student to work at their own pace with the online materials. Synchronous learning, by definition, is the opposite of this, with the teaching being virtually done simultaneously. One hundred two, or about 25.63% of the sample population, experienced this in their Purposive Communication class. Only 49, or 12.31%, were provided with printed modules. This finding of the study is consistent with that of Perveen (2016), claiming that asynchronous e-language learning is quite beneficial for L2 learners. However, one drawback of asynchronous learning is that students cannot get instant feedback and messages.

Moreover, the learning content is not provided in live classes but on different learning management systems or forums (Littlefield, 2018, as cited by Huang et al., 2020). Unlike asynchronous learning, synchronous learning is a more structured learning strategy where the courses are scheduled at designated class hours and in live virtual classroom settings. In that regard, students benefit from real-time interactions and get instant messaging and feedback when needed (Littlefield, 2018, as cited by Huang et al., 2020), making e-learning instructions more interactive and communicative.

#### 4.1.2 English Language Teaching and Learning amid the Pandemic

The table below presents the level of experience of the respondents as to the strategies and approaches used in English language teaching within a Flexible Blended Learning class.

No.	Statement (S)	WM	CR
1	Teacher-centered. The teacher takes the whole part in facilitating lectures while the students serve as passive learners.	3.03	Moderately Experienced
2	Learner-centered. The students are active and also takes part in facilitating learning (individual and group report, presentation, and other activities) while the teacher only plays role of a facilitator or moderator.	2.95	Moderately Experienced
3	Students are taught grammar deductively.	2.95	Moderately Experienced
4	Students are taught grammar inductively.	2.89	Moderately Experienced
5	The teacher imposed strict rules for the students to communicate and interact using the target language (English).	2.77	Moderately Experienced

6	The teacher gives the students positive feedback when they answer correctly.	2.95	Moderately Experienced
7	The teacher provides immediate correction once the students commit errors (grammar, pronunciation, spelling, etc.).	2.82	Moderately Experienced
8	There is emphasis on reading and writing. Little attention is paid to speaking and listening.	2.92	Moderately Experienced
9	Worthwhile tasks are offered to engage and motivate the students to communicate in the target language (English).	2.99	Moderately Experienced
10	The use of students' native language (Filipino) is not restricted.	2.86	Moderately Experienced
11	The teacher provides activities that allow the students to perform tasks that resemble authentic "real life" situations using the target language (English) as medium of communication.	3.11	Moderately Experienced
12	The approach in teaching English provides relaxed yet focused state which makes use of music to promote positive suggestion while the students are learning.	2.86	Moderately Experienced
13	Students are encouraged to self-correct.	3.07	Moderately Experienced
14	Emphasis is on learner-to-learner engagement (working with peers or classmates like that happens in group activities) than individual learning.	2.78	Moderately Experienced
15	Emphasis is on the students who are responsible on their own learning rather than the teacher initiates the teaching.	3.03	Moderately Experienced

Legends: **WM** – Weighted Mean, **CR** – Categorical Responses

Table 2. *Level of Experience of Filipino ESL Students in the English Language Teaching Methodology Employed in their English Class (Purposive Communication)*

The survey results showed that S11 got the highest mean rating of 3.11, which means it provides a positive experience for the students with the teaching strategies and approaches used in the class. Meanwhile, S5 has the lowest mean rating of 2.77, which indicates that language teachers rarely impose strict rules for the students to communicate and interact in the class using English as a medium of communication. This demonstrates that language teachers limit the constraints that students face when speaking in the target language. This claim agrees with the recent study of Madriaga (n.d.) on the significance of the first language (L1) during the second language (L2) acquisition process of the students, suggesting that L1 could be used for the L2 acquisition process, which makes the learning process easier for students and teachers. In this regard, Yough (2010) stated that L1 use is appropriate to give understandable instructions with homework and related activities. However, as classroom instruction and activities in the Purposive Communication class are carried out in the second language, it is still suggested that students must be actively engaged in using the target language. As a result, students will be able to understand the target language further, which will help them to use L2 easily (Stern, 1983, as cited in Mart, 2013). In addition, as L1 will be restricted in the class, in both formal class instruction and consultation hours, the students will eventually be able to achieve proficiency in the target language. Alongside this, in the case of the respondents to this study, their learning experience within the flexible blended learning setup has limited their opportunity to acquire L2 competence fully. This claim is also associated with the type of mode of delivery

employed in the class, the LMS being utilized, by what means classes are executed, in what manner the learning materials are administered and provided to the students, and other related aspects of a pedagogical design that play a crucial role in students' L2 learning and eventually their L2 competence.

#### 4.2 Challenges Encountered by ESL Filipino Learners with the Implementation of Flexible Blended Learning

Challenges Encountered as to FBL Implementation	Frequency	Percentage
Poor or unstable network signal.	158	16.46 %
Poor or unstable internet connection.	244	25.41 %
Large volume of internet-intensive tasks.	37	3.85 %
Strict guidelines of subject requirements.	47	4.9 %
Strict deadlines of submission of activities.	86	8.96 %
Financial difficulty (load allowances for internet access purposes)	156	16.25 %
Unavailability of personal learning devices (mobile phone, laptop, computers, and the others).	71	7.4 %
Home Quarantine/Barangay Lockdown Policy	22	2.29 %
Household responsibilities	138	14.38 %
Others (Please specify) Being a Working Student	1	0.1 %

Table 3. *Challenges Encountered by ESL Filipino Learners with the Implementation of Flexible Blended Learning*

Flexible Blended Learning heavily relies on internet connection so that the students can access their e-modules, handouts, and similar resources. As shown in this table, unstable internet connection (with 244 or about 25.41%) and poor network signal (158 or 16.46%) are the most cited hindrances that the students have experienced. Financial difficulty is the third most recorded response at 156, or 16.25% because most respondents rely on mobile data to gain internet access. The least cited hindrance, at 1 or 0.1% of the total responses, came from one respondent who is a working student.

SCAP and SWAWPH stated that online classes might only force students to go to crowded places such as computer shops to access Wi-Fi or sari-sari stores to get cellular data. Imposing mandatory online classes as an alternative learning arrangement will have a negative effect, especially on most students who have no internet access (Bagayas, 2020). Apart from this, this learning arrangement may be expensive for some to afford as it requires the need and use of the internet to be able to research and send files for their submission of activities to their respective teachers, knowing that most of these students have limited technical resources and signal restrictions. Regardless of the quarantine and lockdown policies, students will do whatever it takes to submit to the needs of their classes.

No.	Statement (S)	WM	CR
1	The class is non-interactive. (Communication is NOT effective and interaction between learner-teacher and learner-learner is NOT active.)	2.48	Less Challenging
2	I find difficulty to work with my classmates in a group project or group activities.	2.63	Challenging
3	There is no strict guidelines in terms of English Only Policy during the class. The teacher does not impose strict rules for the students to communicate and interact using the target language (English).	2.93	Challenging
4	The learning environment is teacher-centered. The teacher takes the whole part in facilitating lectures while the students serve as passive learners.	2.94	Challenging

5	Self-paced learning. The students are active and takes part in facilitating learning (individual and group report, presentation, and other activities) while the teacher only plays role of a facilitator or moderator. However, emphasis is on the students doing most of "learning" on their own rather than the teacher initiating the teaching.	2.97	Challenging
6	There is emphasis on reading and writing. Little attention is given to speaking and listening.	3.02	Challenging
7	The teacher does not provide immediate correction once the students commit errors (grammar, pronunciation, spelling, etc.).	2.53	Challenging
8	The teacher provides overload and intensive assignments/tasks.	2.44	Less Challenging
9	The teacher is not considerate of my mental and psychological health.	2.23	Less Challenging
10	The teacher does not practice sound discretion and leniency in terms of students' outputs and does not impose strict deadlines in terms of submission of activities (Purposive Communication).	2.45	Less Challenging
11	There is no discussion forum that enables a group of people to contribute to the conversation.	3.03	Challenging
12	Limited online materials to support learning.	2.76	Challenging
13	Flexible blended learning does not enable a student to become more involved in the learning process.	2.56	Challenging
14	I am unable to ask queries to my teacher about what I do not thoroughly understand in the lesson.	2.66	Challenging
15	Flexible blended learning gives restriction for me to interact with other students and the teacher synchronously.	2.76	Challenging
<i>Legends:</i> WM – Weighted Mean CR – Categorical Responses			

Table 4. *Challenges Encountered by ESL Filipino Students during FBL Implementation that Affected their English Language Learning*

As shown in this table, among the 15 indicators, 11 are listed as "challenging" remarks, while the other 4 are "less challenging". S11 has the highest weighted mean with 3.03, which is described as "challenging". This indicates that these students prefer more interactive and collaborative English classes. Based on the recorded responses, the changes to the current learning setup have made it difficult for students to work in a group due to technical constraints, including intermittent network signals and internet connection. It is also more challenging to rely only on reading and writing for the English class without much listening and speaking as part of the usual classroom setup. With a more significant portion of the students being asynchronous learners, it is difficult for the professors to monitor their students with the "English Only" policy. This indicates that there are no strict guidelines for the policy during the class. This means that most language teachers do not impose strict rules for the students to communicate and interact using the target language, English. In view of the findings, passive learners have difficulty keeping up with how asynchronous learning is set up. These students also experienced the hassle of pacing themselves with self-learning, resulting in isolation and less involvement within the learning environment. Given that these students are non-English majors taking English classes, considering the constraints of the new type of learning, it is undeniably hard for them to keep abreast of the class that is limited by all the methodology in L2 learning that they usually experience inside the actual face-to-face classroom. This has vastly affected the students' motivation to learn the target language.

#### **4.3 Implications of the Findings of the Study to the Development of the ESL Students' English Language Learning**

Based on the findings of the study, MSC students have an overall positive learning experience with FBL as implemented in their Purposive Communication classes. Therefore, the positive learning experiences of these students indicate their acceptability and elicit their positive view of the alternative learning arrangement. This has been the college's solution to academic challenges amidst the current pandemic and, eventually, can be a long-term response, especially in times of crisis. Nevertheless, the negative effects of today's pandemic in education brought various restrictions, such as (1) unstable network signal and internet connection, (2) unavailability of learning devices and resources, (3) inaccessibility with the learning applications and Learning Management Systems, and (4) financial constraint, which hindered the students from keeping abreast of the new learning system. In this case, given the challenges and setbacks entailed by the Flexible Blended Learning modality, as much as possible, language teachers have demonstrated leniency and consideration towards their students. In the context of English language teaching and learning, considering the challenges these students encounter regarding reading comprehension, writing, and speaking facets, this study suggests exploring both synchronous and asynchronous learning strategies to ensure more interactive and communicative English classes. In this regard, the results and findings of this study may be considered the basis for creating policies and action plans and be used for formulating interventions to deal with academic challenges and ensure educational continuity amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As a response to the adverse impact of the implemented alternative learning modality on the development of English language learning proficiency of MSC students, the following may be regarded: (1) continuous support to meet the needs of the most vulnerable individuals, with special attention to those students who cannot fully adapt to the new learning system considering the foregoing challenges and other related constraints presented and discussed in this study; (2) designing a contingency plan with diverse academic countermeasures with consideration to promote inclusive learning; (3) paying due attention to ensure that the mental health and psychological well-being of the students are prioritized, especially in this trying time amid the academic challenges being faced by the education system; and (4) designing a more inclusive ELT methodology to ensure more efficient, flexible, convenient, and student-friendly English language learning classes.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study employed mixed-method research that determined the FBL experiences of the 297 MSC students enrolled in the Purposive Communication Class for the 2nd semester, A.Y. 2020-2021. Based on the foregoing findings of the study, MSC students have an overall positive experience with FBL as implemented in their Purposive Communication class. At any rate, continuous support must be provided to those students who struggle to adapt to the needs of today's education system. This may help mitigate the widening inequality among students with their right to equal learning opportunities.

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