

## *Using Blended Learning for EAL Interventions With Elementary/Primary Students*

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### **Abstract**

This paper puts forward a case for the use of blended learning as a form of pull-out intervention, specifically for EAL (English as an Additional Language) elementary students who need to rapidly catch up on basic interpersonal communication skills. Practical suggestions are provided. This approach is based on both quantitative and qualitative data from a 2020 study which explored best practice in EAL interventions for students who were progressing to the elementary stage of education. Beyond this, research and literature backed, best practice approaches to EAL interventions and online learning are considered. Finally, teacher interviews were conducted for the purpose of checking the practitioner perspective on the validity of this approach in the current educational climate. The limitations of this paper, as well as consideration for future study of this topic, are provided.

Keywords: Blended Learning, EAL Intervention, Online Education, Elementary, Online Learning

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a global shift towards teachers needing to be fully equipped as online teaching competent. This is down to a range of reasons, but most prominently the Covid-19 epidemic which occurred, as well as the improvement in platforms and technologies available for this endeavour. Terms like blended learning, flipped learning and digital homework are now commonplace in schools around the world (Macur, 2022). It has been and still is the case that language barriers for students in classrooms negatively impact their social integration, academic performance and self-confidence (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson & Ungerleider, 2011). With increasing numbers of international schools around the world (Brummitt, & Keeling, 2013), and high numbers of non-English speaking children moving to English-speaking countries, it is essential that educators keep up with developing technologies and innovate their practice. Given that teachers are now better trained, prepared and more competent in regards to teaching online (and that technologies and training to support this are more easily available) an opportunity to integrate these two critical components of education manifests. This paper looks specifically at the integration of a BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) intervention and Blended Learning. More specifically, whether using online sessions to deliver pullout BICS interventions after school could be appropriate and beneficial. The purpose of this is to find out if the literature backs up a need for this approach to be considered, as well as to find out teacher perspectives in relation to this concept. The final purpose is to provide practical suggestions which arise from this research process.

## The Initial Research

The initial research followed a mixed methods data collection approach, including teacher interviews and student assessment results. 10 students lacking the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills to join Grade 1 went through an intensive 6-week pullout EAL intervention (a context-specific test was used to determine their need for this). All students who had initially failed their entry test passed their retake of the this test, the average score went up from 31% to 81%. Off the back of the teacher interviews, it was found that most teachers strongly agreed that the intervention improved all 4 key language skills & that the students were now ready for Grade 1. This intervention took place during the summer holiday between the Kindergarten phase and Grade 1 (Macur, G. 2020).

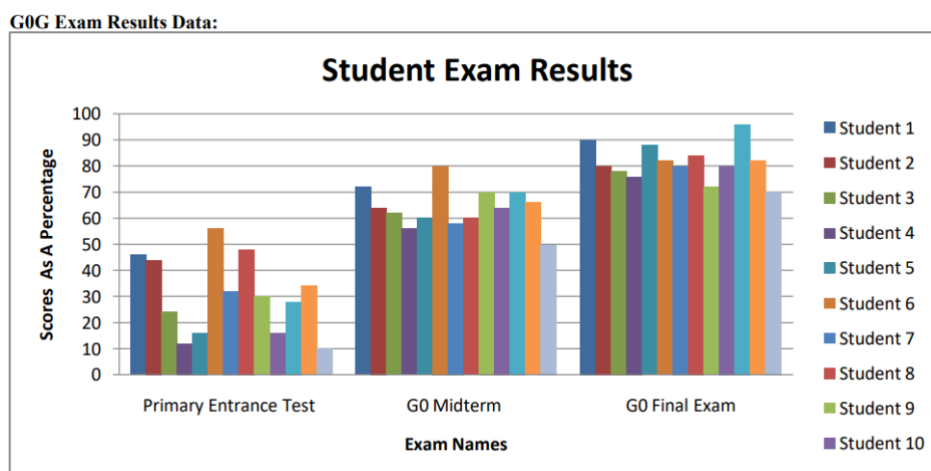


Figure 1: This is an image of the 10 students test results at the Entrance Test stage, the midterm test of the intervention and the final exam of the intervention. (Macur, G. 2020)

The findings of this study indicated that a pullout method was effective for targeted language acquisition in a BICS intervention context. It was also found that: Leadership must be competent; Teachers must be trained; Tailored language teaching for the educational context can be taught effectively; Context relevant language required for Grade 1 can be taught via a 6-week EAL intervention; Interventions must be well-planned and content should be cumulative (Macur, G. 2020).

## **The Next Steps**

For this paper, the use of a mixed methods research style was adopted. This was done to better inform data triangulation and the reliability of results (Almalki, S. 2016). A combination of a literature review of best practices, three elementary/primary specialist teacher interviews, and the data from the 2020 study were used. The literature review gives context to the problem of language barriers for students. Its other purpose is to provide information about pullout interventions, blended learning and BICS language acquisition. The teacher interviews are to gain necessary practitioner insight into the viability, problems and benefits of using blended learning for a BICS intervention. Finally, the 2020 study and its data provide much-needed insight into key considerations for running a pullout intervention effectively.

After the findings were gathered, a comparison of these findings was done, to see what patterns would emerge from the three research areas. Major patterns which stand out would form the basis of practical suggestions and considerations for using a blended learning approach when developing a BICS intervention. Finally, the limitations of this paper were listed to ensure clarity and transparency.

## **The Findings**

The first area of research was a literature review. It was found that one of the prominent reasons students with language barriers have negative experiences, such as the three key ones listed, is that they are often forgotten by teachers and peers. Not necessarily in a malicious way, but in a busy classroom, louder students often garner more of the attention and students with language barriers tend to be quieter (Cassar, & Tonna, 2018). It was also found that whilst in the context of Macur's 2020 study a pullout intervention was effective, there are circumstances where pullout interventions make students feel singled out. This can lead students to negative experiences and perceptions of school. Another issue which arose was the missing of essential mainstream class time (Honigsfeld, & Nordmeyer, 2020). In relation to blended learning, it was evidenced that this approach was effective as a method of teaching key facts and basic information. Teachers should use class time with the teacher physically present for the creative high order thinking tasks, and the online time for key facts (Tayebnik, & Puteh, 2013). Finally, in relation to BICS, it was found that this basic survival skills aspect of language should be taught cumulatively (Sun, F, 2016). No examples of a BICS intervention being run through blended learning were found in the peer-reviewed literature. Positive results from the teacher interviews would indicate a need for further research within a school to test the effectiveness of this approach. More specifically, developing and rolling out a BICS blended learning intervention and reporting on the effectiveness of this process. A two-group approach would reap the most reliable results, with one group being pulled out from class during lesson time, and the other group being left in their classes and having an after-school session instead.

The second area of research was a set of three elementary specialist EAL teachers. The two questions asked to each of these teachers were: “Would an EAL intervention for BICS be successful if ran through blended learning?” and “What problems and benefits can you predict?” In response to the first question, each teacher agreed it would be successful. Three relevant statements included: “It would save our class time.” “Blended learning would mean we can teach the basic classroom language more quickly, helping the students to integrate and communicate their basic needs and wants.” “I could use the online time to review lesson content and ensure the students are learning.” The final statement highlights the need for proper teacher training, even experienced practitioners can make this mistake, a targeted BICS intervention would not be used to review lesson content, it would be used to teach the key BICS language needed for that school's context. The problems and benefits which arose were as seen in the table below:

<b>Problems</b>	<b>Benefits</b>
Internet issues.	Class time can be more purposeful.
Lack of equipment.	More time spent using the language intended to be learnt.
Extra work for teachers after school.	Online time can be hyper focused on the BICS required for the classroom.
Extra screen time for students.	Students can gain their BICS more quickly, avoiding some of the issues they may face as a result of language deficiency.
Students may not attend the online classes.	Class time can be more purposeful.

Table 1: This is a table to show the problems and benefits listed by the teachers interviewed for the creation of this paper.

Thirdly, the initial 2020 study findings were mentioned in “This Initial Research” section of this paper.

### **The Common Findings**

It was found that all three research areas (the initial research, the literature review and the teacher interviews) agreed that: A pullout/blended learning approach could be effective as an EAL intervention; Learning BICS for the classroom context as fast as possible will have positive impacts; There are problems and benefits to consider when running EAL interventions. These common findings indicate that the use of a BICS intervention through blended learning is an appropriate method. They also indicate that when doing this, proper planning and consideration of benefits and problems need to be implemented. The major benefits which stood out were reducing the chances of students feeling singled out, and ensuring they do not miss out on mainstream class time. The major problems which stood out were increased work and screen time for students and teachers.

### **Practical Suggestions**

The practical suggestions for practitioners who consider using blended learning for a BICS intervention with elementary students include: Ensure language teaching is cumulative; Ensure the intervention is short and focused on the BICS relevant for the context in question; Use teachers competent in language teaching; Keep intervention sessions short to minimise extra work & screen time for teachers and students; Use a BICS test to place students and pass them through the EAL intervention; Use small class sizes for EAL intervention.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of this paper include: There was no practical practice of a blended learning intervention; Teacher perspective can be skewed and context-specific; The data for the intervention from 2020 was from an intervention run in a physical classroom, however, it was still a pullout intervention.

## **Conclusion**

This paper looked at a novel way to deliver a BICS intervention to elementary students, specifically, using blended learning. The purpose of this was to alleviate the negative impacts of pullout interventions on students in schools, such as missed class time and a feeling of being singled out (without losing the progress in BICS that would be made during this pullout time). To achieve this goal, data from a 2020 study was reviewed. Alongside this data, three elementary teachers were interviewed and the literature on this topic was reviewed. The findings revealed a consensus of the three teachers, that this would be an effective approach, saving them time and helping students catch up in their BICS. Beyond this, the data from 2020 indicated that BICS could be taught using a short intervention with targeted learning goals. To achieve this, the literature review highlighted the need to teach BICS cumulatively. Problems, benefits and practical suggestions were provided.

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