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**Teachers' and students' perceptions of teaching and learning English in small
classes in Ecuador.**

TRABAJO DE FIN DE TITULACIÓN

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Magister

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De mi consideración:

El presente trabajo de fin de titulación: Teachers' and students' perceptions of teaching and learning English in small clases in Ecuador realizado por Ramos Ponce Ana Lucía, ha sido orientado y revisado durante su ejecución, por cuanto se aprueba la presentación del mismo.

Loja, 2014

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all the professionals in education who can find it useful to improve their teaching, and also to all the students who will benefit from their teachers' enrichment and growth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I want to thank God for giving me the abilities and the strength needed to accomplish this goal; to my family, source of support and inspiration; to my teachers who have guided me through all this learning process, and to the authorities of Unidad Educativa Terranova for their valuable cooperation.

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ABSTRACT

This research is focused on analyzing teachers' and students' perceptions of teaching and learning English in small classes; seeking to conclude whether working in small classes benefits the teaching and learning processes.

For this purpose, this study was carried out through qualitative and quantitative approaches; that included classroom observation and surveys.

The population analyzed belongs to a private-bilingual school in Cumbaya. Five English teachers and ninety-two students from five classes were taken as the sample.

The aim of the observations was to analyze classroom management, use of teaching strategies and resources, and the quality of interactions in five English classes. The surveys aimed to inquire about teachers' and students' perceptions about benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes, the teaching strategies resources that benefit the teaching process, the way students feel about learning in small classes, and the possible limitations of working in small classes. Answers were tabulated and outcomes shown in tables.

Results demonstrate that working in small classes benefits the learning process, because interactions, including teachers' feedback, enhance students' achievement in a supportive, challenging learning environment.

Key words: qualitative, quantitative, management, feedback, interaction, strategies, learning, teaching, small classes, achievement.

RESUMEN

Este estudio se enfoca en analizar percepciones de estudiantes y profesores sobre la enseñanza y aprendizaje del Inglés en clases pequeñas; y busca demostrar si existen beneficios para estos procesos relacionados al tamaño de la clase.

Con este propósito, se utilizaron métodos cualitativos (observaciones de clase) y cuantitativos (encuestas).

La población analizada pertenece a un colegio privado-bilingüe de Cumbaya. La muestra corresponde a cinco profesores de Inglés y noventa y dos estudiantes. Las observaciones analizaron manejo de clase, uso de estrategias de enseñanza y recursos, así como calidad y nivel de interacción. Las encuestas indagaron sobre percepciones de la muestra acerca de beneficios de enseñar y aprender Inglés en clases pequeñas, estrategias y recursos que aportan al proceso de enseñanza, sentimiento de estudiantes al aprender en clases pequeñas y limitaciones de trabajar en clases con pocos alumnos.

Las respuestas fueron tabuladas y los resultados expuestos en tablas, demostrando que trabajar en clases pequeñas beneficia al proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, pues el nivel de interacción y la constante retroalimentación incrementan el grado de logro en un entorno de aprendizaje desafiante y solidario.

Palabras clave: cualitativo, cuantitativo, manejo, retroalimentación, interacción, estrategias, aprendizaje, enseñanza, clases pequeñas, logro.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decades English has become a worldwide spoken language due to the process of globalization, together with the improvement and fast development of the technological aspects all over the world.

This fact brought attention into the importance of understanding English, but above all the vitality of being able to communicate in English effectively. Teaching methods started to be questioned and English teachers judged according to their students' performance and accomplishments.

Several training programs and certifications for teachers appeared to be the short-term solution to the mentioned problem. However, the fact that teachers can improve their teaching techniques and acquire a deeper understanding of the English language grammar rules, did not resulted in the students' success and academic achievement.

This circumstance made researchers and specialists all over the world inquire the factors that are closely related to better students' results. A research conducted by Blatchford, Russell, Basset, Brown, & Martin (2006), aimed to investigate effects of class size on teaching of pupils aged 7 – 11 years showing that in small classes students get individual attention and teaching is more efficient and adventurous, allowing teachers more time to plan, mark and assess. Authors concluded that the characteristics of small classes permit students experience academic and emotional benefits; and the physical elements of a small class allow teachers to manage the classroom effectively.

With a similar purpose on mind, Galton and Pell (2009) conducted a research to discover the effects of class size on students' motivation, attainments and improved attitudes. They

determined that teachers working in small classes are capable to use more effective and diverse teaching methods which result in higher level of interactions.

A study led by Din (1999) investigated on issues related to functions and benefits of small classes to both teachers and students through random survey package with open-ended questions; concluding that small classes are beneficial for both teachers' and students' motivation and effectiveness. They stated that a small class facilitates classroom management, offers the opportunity for more guidance and interactions, which helps create positive learning atmosphere.

Throughout decades of investigation, researchers have discovered that not only a variety of teachers' techniques are the cause of learners' success. Some other features like an adequate classroom management, the physical space of the classroom, the change in interaction patterns, the use of resources and materials, etc., were linked to higher results and students' progress. Further studies came to the conclusion that the social/emotional aspects had a great influence on learners' achievement too. Students' motivation, for example, is closely related to their involvement; teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction are the key for students' confidence and participation; and appropriate feedback will also help students understand and manage their weaknesses and strengths.

However, all those factors included together in a class were really difficult to find. The number of students in a classroom will determine the possibility of the existence of these aspects, as well as a better teachers' disposition and energy to work.

Class size is obviously related to higher benefits for both teachers and students. A small class offers students greater opportunities for participation, teachers' individualized attention and positive interactions; it also offers teachers the possibility of knowing students, applying more techniques, and having sense of accomplishment that teachers in large classes cannot develop.

With these results as antecedent, the purpose of this study is to research on teachers' and students' perceptions of teaching and learning English in small classes in Ecuador. This will determine if working in small classes offers real benefits for the teaching and learning process, having as consequence engaged, involved and confident students with better results.

Four questions directed this study, each of them included a group of aspects oriented to provide a deeper understanding on this topic

- What are the benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes?
- What teaching strategies and resources benefit the teaching of English in small classes?
- How do students feel about learning English in small classes?
- Are there any limitations when teaching English in small classes?

This study will offer lights for institutions which are willing to improve the English learning and teaching process, it will also guide future researches whose aim is related to the improvement of the educational system. It will be beneficial for teachers in Ecuador who want to understand how the existence or absence of certain factors in the classroom will determine the success or failure of the teaching and learning processes.

During the conduction of this research, I found that the first and second items in section B (in classes with a small number of students: 1. The activities done allow students to practice listening skills. 2. The activities done allow students to practice speaking skills) are almost the opposite of the last item in section D (in classes with a small number of students: Listening and speaking skills are more difficult to develop). Which means that if items one and two in section B obtained high percentages of teachers and students agreeing with them, the last item in section D should have almost the same percentages of teachers and students disagreeing with it, and results do not show that. This fact suggests the lack of reliability in the results obtained for last

item, which is the only limitation found in this research. All items in the instruments used should have been written avoiding ambiguity.

METHOD

With the stated objective and the aim of this research, the next course of action was to analyze teachers' and students' perceptions of teaching English in small classes in Ecuador.

Setting and Participants

This study was carried out in Unidad Educativa Terranova, a private, bilingual school located in Cumbaya, near Quito. The schools' authorities permitted the analysis of a sort of the population of students and teachers to inquire into their perceptions to conclude whether they consider there are benefits of working in small classes that lead to the students' better results related to their academic achievement. The school's director also authorized the further publication of the results using the school's name.

The sample analyzed corresponds to five English teachers and ninety-two students from sixth, eight grades and first baccalaureate.

Procedures

To start the analysis and the further interpretation of results in this study, it was vital to gather information to support the topic in this research. Having examined similar studies around the world, and aligned literature from books, as shown in the literature review section, the background was established for an appropriate and accurate analysis of the main factors that direct this research: the benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes, the different teaching strategies and resources that benefit the teaching of English in small classes, the way students feel about learning English in small classes, and the possible limitations when teaching English in small classes.

This research was carried out through qualitative and quantitative approaches, which included five classes' observations and note-taking besides objective surveys applied to five English language teachers and ninety-two students in the mentioned classes above.

Results from the surveys were tabulated and transferred to tables that included the frequency and percentages of responses for each of the four main aspects that lead this research.

The collected data was explored, analyzed and described through tables for every aspect detailed in the four guiding questions. The interpretation of the results contains aspects that were observed in each of the five classes to corroborate or contrast what teachers and students perceived. Finally, theoretical findings were included to support the analysis.

DISCUSSION

Literature Review

“The more the better” has a common say that applies to most of the social sceneries in human life. But when it comes to class size and its impact on teaching and learning, its validity comes to be questioned. Changes have been done not only in techniques and approaches to teaching and learning, but also in the way people conceive the effectiveness of both processes. Facts and experiences have shown that learning can take a better place if its environment has some characteristics like the appropriate classroom management, adequate teacher-student and student-student interactions, proper teaching techniques and strategies and, of course, the effect that class size has on learning.

Learning English has become a worldwide need because of the process of globalization which promotes to communicate in a unified language, and that is English. Since it has become necessary to speak and understand English for lots of purposes, English teachers have been called to improve teaching techniques and strategies in order to help students succeed in their learning process. Researchers have concluded that small classes can offer teachers and students invaluable benefits that can lead them to accomplish their goals.

Class size

If all the teaching process is demanding and somehow overwhelming, working with a reduced group can offer tons of advantages. According to Deutsch as cited in (Bray & Kehle 2011):

Class size is defined as the number of students that are regularly present in a teacher’s classroom for instruction. A class size of less than 20 students is considered to be small, and is associated with positive student outcomes; classrooms with more than 20 students

are viewed as large (Finn, Pannozzo & Achilles, 2003). Finn et al. 2003 conducted a comprehensive review of multiple investigations of class size (...), and summarized the benefits of reduced class size in three types of outcomes: a) student's learning behaviors; b) student's social behaviors; and c) student – teacher interactions. Compared to students in large classes (more than 20 students), students in small classes were found to display higher levels of academic engagement, which is positively correlated with academic achievement. (p. 69)

As cited above, when thinking about the benefits of teaching English in small classes a positive and appropriate students' behavior, a higher level of interaction, individualized attention together with students' engagement can start the list. It is obvious to come up with the fact that the smaller the class is, the higher the interaction can be expected; the less students a teacher has in a group, the more attention the latter can offer to special needs, the more opportunities students have to show what they know and to have teacher's guidance, the more involved and academically engaged they will be. Bray & Kehle (2011) imply that the smaller the class is, the greater the opportunities are for students to take part in speaking activities. Besides, they observed that in small classes students were more engaged in academic activities, which resulted in a better understanding of the content, and, therefore, a greater academic accomplishment. Teachers working with small groups are able to give individual attention to students' needs, which allows them to identify on time those students who need reinforcement and additional help.

Knowing which students need extra attention or individualized guidance will allow teachers to focus on their flaws and to give them security to develop and improve their oral and written production. By being able to give everyone in the class the opportunity to take part in

discussions or any speaking activity, the teacher will have the chance to assess them all and have immediate feedback on what has been taught. As students in small classes are “forced” to take an active part in the class, they have the opportunity to learn, correct mistakes during a shorter process than if they were in larger classes. Blatchford (2003) came to the conclusion that when working in small classes teachers can identify students’ strengths and weaknesses better, they can easily assess the quality of students’ work and give them feedback right away, as a comment, correction or extra help. When students’ know that the teacher responds immediately, and is willing to offer individualized help, they get focused on tasks during longer periods.

If students know that the teacher is always attentive and aware, they will feel the positive pressure of performing better and finishing given tasks on time. Students in small classes experience the advantage of having teachers constantly monitoring their work, which results in strategic intervention to help weak students on the appropriate time.

Teacher-student and student-student interactions.

Both teachers and students have some goals to achieve during their time together in the classroom. Knowledge and appropriate instructions are not the only issues to be considered as promoters of reaching those goals; the relationship between teachers and students is a factor that, if it is well managed, it will lead to academic attainment and emotional fulfillment. It is important to take into account the types and the quality of interactions that can take place in small classes. If the group is little, students will feel soon comfortable and secure enough to interact with peers, and also will feel closer to the teacher thanks to the individualized attention received. Cooperation, empathy and friendship are going to play a role in favor of the learning process and will make the teaching easier and effective as well.

Berns (2010, p. 210) stated that:

In small classes more learning activities take place and the greater interaction among students enables them to understand one another, resulting in an increase in cooperative behavior. Peers influence students' motivation to succeed. Teachers have more time to monitor students' "on-task" behavior and can provide quicker and more thorough feedback to students. Also, potential disciplinary problems can be identified and resolved more quickly (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Teacher-student interaction plays an important role in the learning process because the way students perceive teachers' attitude towards them will determine their attitude in class too. A positive, supportive relationship between teachers and students has a direct effect on their motivation and, therefore, on their learning. In this aspect, Bray & Kehle (2011) say that interactions in small classes are more frequent, positive and beneficial compared to those in larger classes. Teachers that work with a small group of students respond better to their needs, which gives students the confidence and the enthusiasm of initiate and maintain interactions with teachers more often.

Constructive, sustaining interactions will help both teachers and students because if the interactions are effective, the whole learning process is beneficial making the teachers feel enthusiastic and the students supported; this way everything flows ensuring success in shorter terms. This situation can easily take place in small classes where, according to Blatchford (2003), sustained interactions together with effective, appropriate support, and individualized attention to lots of students take place. The nature and the frequency of interactions in small classes offer learners a safe, kind and encouraging learning atmosphere, because teachers can accompany students during the whole learning process, making the teaching activities more effective as well.

Time in class can be wisely used according to the planning if the interactions allow learning to take place which will give, as consequence, more positive effects in the way students perceive and manage their learning experiences.

Managing learning

Together with the cooperative and encouraging interactions, teaching in small classes offers teachers the possibility to manage learning effectively. Bray & Kehle (2011, p. 263-264) affirm that:

Effective classroom management includes four interrelated components: a) organizing and implementing instruction, b) using group management methods to encourage academic engagement, c) promoting the development of students' social skills and self-regulation; and d) developing caring, supportive relationships with students.

When teachers manage the classroom and the learning process effectively, they are guaranteeing and facilitating the development of not only academic, but also social skills; both needed for students' adaptation and success. Part of the appropriate management deals with how teachers respond to students' interventions. Small classes provide the opportunity for teachers to offer immediate feedback to students under the form of correction, guidance or special recognition. Archer & Hughes (2011) consider that praise has a positive effect on students' behavior, focus and performance. Teachers' approval and recognition will enhance students to increase their attention and improve the quality of their work, which will have a positive impact on the whole class atmosphere. When students receive opportune information about their performance and academic growth, they feel proud, supported and guided, which results in a higher motivation and stronger, closer relationship between the teacher and the students.

In a small class it is easier for the teacher to control and deal with disturbing and inappropriate behavior; being able this way to promote and reinforce academic achievement through well thought actions that can be taken effectively due to the class size. For teachers, a successful classroom management implies organizing time to plan the lesson in advance, being flexible to adapt the activities planned to students' preferences and needs, keeping the class' pace appropriate, and taking actions to create a healthy, secure environment to ensure the well-being of students and their academic success together with their social development in order to maintain students involved, engaged and challenged. For this purpose, students must have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do and to achieve; this knowledge or awareness lowers the tension that students can feel when it comes to following directions or understanding instructions. With the anxiety diminished, the learning environment becomes a safe place to learn and experiment with the language and maximize learning. In fact, Bray & Kehle (2011, p. 263) agree with the fact that "Effective classroom management promotes positive academic outcomes and enhances social/emotional growth through the development of a safe orderly environment."

Teaching techniques, strategies or activities for teaching English in small classes.

Although the dynamic in the class and, therefore, the students' motivation have a direct effect on learning, the strategies and methods that teachers apply in the classroom will also contribute to academic accomplishment. According to Kaplan & Owings (2002) students' motivation and expectation are strongly related to the different techniques teachers may use to keep students on track. Therefore, as teachers' techniques have an impact on students' engagement, they are also influencing students' success. It is vital for teachers to keep students interested and challenged in an appropriate –not threatening- level through activities designed to achieve a learning goal. For this purpose, teachers must know students' needs, preferences and

learning styles in order to give all of them the chance of enjoying learning and demonstrate what they have learned in a variety of contexts. It is important for teachers to leave their comfort zone and try new things that can lead learners to the sensation of achievement. According to Caplan & Owings (2002), teachers must be able to use different activities and strategies to keep students interested and attentive. Teachers need to be aware of the different learning styles students may have and plan diverse activities that can offer them opportunities to show what they have learned demonstrating the skills they have acquired or developed.

When it comes to teaching in small classes, some techniques can be more helpful than others in increasing students' success. Caplan & Owings (2002) align with the fact that as the group is little, it is easier for the teacher to establish a personal, one-to-one relationship with each student, to help them personalize knowledge and identify students' interests, to include them in the classroom activities. Teachers can plan a set of activities that include techniques to develop and assess students' performance in the four basic skills with the opportunity to provide an immediate feedback.

Finn & Wang (2002) confirm that:

The main effect of having fewer students is that teachers individualize their instruction. They adjust their teaching to the needs of each student. Through one-to-one tutoring, small groups teaching, and total class teaching, individual students' understanding are elicited, critiqued and corrected or extended. The content of instruction is uniform, but the teaching procedures vary with the student. This increased use of individualization in reduced-size classes is a result of increased knowledge of students: less discipline, which makes more time available for instruction; and greater teacher enthusiasm. The individualization that is produced along with an increased use of hands-on activities that

these three elements also enable, results in increased content, in more student self-direction and, ultimately, it is speculated, in greater student achievement as evidenced by higher achievement scores. (Molnar, Smith & Zahorik, 1988, 1999). (p. 5)

Together with the individualization, there are some other teaching techniques that have been proven to be effective when working in small classes. By having few students in the class, teachers can seize the opportunity of applying strategies that can help students improve and fasten their academic achievement.

Herrell & Jordan (2012) list a group of teaching techniques and strategies that are worth executing in small classes because they offer great advantages when it comes to acquiring or reinforcing knowledge, gaining confidence, and improving results. For example, *working with small groups and peers* can offer learners great opportunities for verbal interaction; *peer tutoring* has the purpose of helping low achievers surpass their flaws; *skills grouping* is a technique that teachers use when they need to give focused attention to groups with shared needs and characteristics; *cooperative learning* implies students working together to achieve a goal giving them the chance of working in an independent way; *guided reading* allows the teacher to give individual guidance and feedback; and *tutorials*. In this model, all the daily activities follow a routine for each content subject –warm up, guided practice, independent practice and evaluation-. During this whole learning cycle the teacher is constantly monitoring and observing levels of understanding. Students get the opportunity to work together with the teacher, who models the activity, before they can work effectively in an independent way.

Learning environment in small classes.

Teachers employ multiple strategies to accomplish all the pre-established learning goals. One of those strategies that has gained a lot of attention is the physical distribution of the class,

including seating arrangements; since it affects the way teachers manage the class and, therefore, its dynamic and climate.

The way students are physically organized, will also create a specific atmosphere in the class characterized by closeness, cooperative working and; therefore the security of having extra guidance that can come from peers too.

As Bray & Kehle (2011) affirm, the seating arrangement has an effect on students' behavior. The way they are physically organized can help them making contact with the teacher, remaining focused on task, taking an active part in the class activities, as well as looking at the board and the class materials.

Teachers working in small classes are able to monitor and support the groups' work, offering individualized attention and help. A small number of students in a class allow the teachers to experiment with different seating arrangement according to the purpose or nature of each activity, which will guarantee a higher degree of commitment and focus students will show to accomplish a task.

According to Harmer (2007, p. 42):

In small classes, many teachers and students prefer circles or horseshoes. In a horseshoe the teacher will be probably at the open end of the arrangement since that may well where the board, overhead projector and/or computer are situated. In a circle, the teacher's position –where the board is situated- is less dominating. (...) With all the people in the room seating in a circle, there is a far great feeling of equality (...). This may not be quite so true of the horseshoe shape where the teacher is often located in a commanding position. If teachers believe in lowering the barriers between themselves and their students, this kind of seating arrangement will help. There are other advantages too, chief

among which is the fact that all the students can see each other.(...) The classroom is thus a more intimate place and the potential for students to share feelings and information through talking, eye contact or expressive body movements is far greater.

There is definitely a link between the classroom and learning environment with the results students can show, because their social and academic performance depend not only on their knowledge, but also on their motivation and the way they feel facing every day's activities in the class. It has been proven that emotional and physical aspects that make up a classroom will determine the academic success and the social adaptation that all students need in order to achieve educational growth. When it comes to teaching processes, everything seems to be interrelated because all the variables or dimensions explained above have some shared characteristics. Bray & Kehle (2011) state that these dimensions include the affective/emotional aspects as well as the physical, and academic characteristics. The former refers to the attitudes and interactions that can create a positive, supportive climate in the classroom; the physical aspects include the class size, seating arrangement, and the noise level that can influence the students' performance and concentration; the academic features may include the classroom management and change of interaction patterns. All of these dimensions are related to behavior in the class, and the students' ability to concentrate on and accomplish challenging tasks.

The importance that authors and researchers around the world have been giving to the effects of class size on academic achievement, have lead them to inquire about this issue and study some classes to analyze and state how small classes can affect teachers' and students' performance.

The first study conducted by Blatchford & Basset (2006) stated the purpose of investigating effects of class size on teaching of pupils aged 7 – 11 years through the application

of a multi-method approach, integrating qualitative information from teachers' end-of-year accounts and data from case studies with quantitative information from systematic observations, they also used questionnaires as well as teachers' own experiences and detailed case studies. During the study, researchers could observe and determine that there are some significant aspects regarding small classes considered as beneficial for the teaching and learning process. There is a high quality level of student-student and teacher-student interactions, as well as an active role of students in their learning process due to the fact that in small classes individualization is possible and the teaching process is student-centered. This allows students to have their needs satisfied not only with the academic level, but also with the emotional one because they are all given the same amount of opportunities, supporting feedback and equal treatment. The physical elements in a small class permit teachers to manage the classroom effectively because they can focus on teaching and group students according to the nature of tasks. Nonetheless the benefits are for teachers too: they have time enough to plan and assess, which gives them also the opportunity to be flexible and to experiment with new teaching techniques and this helps them reach a professional level of satisfaction.

The second study carried out by Blatchford, Bassett & Brown (2011) seeks to research about the relationships between class size and classroom processes: student classroom engagement and teacher-student interactions. When explaining the methodology used to conduct the study, the authors explain that they conducted anecdotal studies mainly supported by teachers' opinions and perceptions; they state that this study was based on a naturalistic, non-experimental approach and that they used observations and statistical analysis to show and interpret results. Multilevel regression methods were also used to examine the existing connections between class size and students' achievement. Setting and participants were selected

randomly. During the observations, researchers detected that class size has an effect on students' focus on task and the amount and quality of teacher-student interactions, since in small classes students tend to receive constant teacher's attention because the latter does not have to deal with a lot of negative behavior. Researchers concluded that small classes are beneficial for low achievers who can be constantly monitored by teachers and get distinguished curriculum according to their characteristics and needs.

In the third study directed by Blatchford, Bassett and Brown (2005), the purpose was to analyze the effect of class size on teacher-student interactions, student engagement and student-student interaction, as well as the class size effects on classroom processes: how school subject affects class size effects and the effect of extra adults in the classroom on teacher's and student's behavior. This study was carried through data collection, systematic classroom observation, multilevel statistical models, regression models, longitudinal research design, and random selection of participating schools. Researchers noticed the active role students have in small classes and the experiencing of more teaching since they are the focus on teacher's attention. There is an evident effect of class size on individual attention, depending also on the subject being taught. However, during English classes there is less individualized attention. Having teacher assistants in the classroom has an effect not on academic outcomes, but mainly on teacher-student interactions due to the fact that individualization increases. This study also showed how teacher's and student's behavior are affected by the school subject. Finally, the pressure teachers experience during the teaching process decreases in small classes since they feel they can offer individualized and opportune attention and support to children.

The fourth study conducted by Galton and Pell (2009) attempted to discover if class size has an effect on the students' accomplishment and improved attitudes and motivation; to find out

whether the years' experience of studying in small classes can affect in a positive way student's attitudes and achievement; if the achievement and the attitudes shown in class are affected by teachers' and students' behavior, and if small classes can benefit schools with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This research was carried out through the administration of achievement tests and questionnaires for students and teacher questionnaires that seek to explore their opinion about the benefits of small class teaching. The researches stated that their study involved three levels of analysis; the school (and all the population's characteristics), the class (observation of teachers' characteristics and class size), and the students (observation of their characteristics and measurement of their results). Galton and Pell detected that in small classes is evident the individualized and constant attention, as well as the amount of higher quality interactions; they observed that teachers use more effective and varied teaching methods and approaches in smaller classes, but those also vary according to the subject. Researchers concluded that the benefits of small classes are greatest during the first year of primary school and attitudes and motivation tend to decline over years; students' behavior is not affected by teaching approaches. The class size did not show effects on schools with academically disadvantaged students; however, in those schools boys showed more improvement and slower decline of attitudes than girls. Galton and Pell determined that the most useful support from teachers was time and their improvement in teaching strategies to exploit the potential of smaller classes.

The fifth study led by Din (1999) researched on all the aspects related to the benefits that small classes offer to teachers and students. The results showed that teachers perceived that class size is not related to student's attainment, but it is a beneficial factor related to an effective classroom management that includes more individualized attention to students with special needs,

and more high level interactions in a better learning atmosphere. The aim of this study was to research class size as a factor related to benefits in schools, as well as the things that should be done to teach and learn effectively in large classes. To get this information, Din used random survey package with open-ended questions. Results showed that most of the teachers considered that a small class is integrated by 45 to 50 students and they agreed on that these classes are beneficial for both teacher's and student's quality and motivation. According to their experience, small classes enable an effective classroom management and a positive learning environment ever since individualization and guidance are possible. The researcher concluded that most of the rural teachers did not believe there is a connection between class size and student achievement; but, they considered that small classes enable classroom management, more student-teacher interactions, more individualized help from the teachers, and the reduction of teachers' workloads.

In conclusion, the phrase having less and getting more can perfectly describe what teaching and learning in small classes mean: less students, more attention and interaction; less disruption, more understanding and learning; less stress, more achievement and satisfaction. After all the stated above, it remains obviously that class size is definitely linked with progress, achievement and motivation. Working in small classes has beneficial effects on the learning process because the best support that teachers can offer is their time and guidance during the different students' developmental stages; and this constant teacher's monitoring is only possible if the group is small. When students experience being the focus of teacher's attention, they can show an enormous improvement. The individual consideration teachers can offer to students' special needs will give the latter the opportunity to understand, learn and; therefore, know what has been taught. This feeling of academic accomplishment together with the social and emotional

development that occurs in a safe learning environment of small classes, is going to make learners feel engaged and involved with the tasks. Those students' benefits become part and cause for teachers' benefits as well; having time to plan, assess and teach effectively, they can feel professionally successful and personally relieved, which will increase their eagerness to explore new techniques and approaches that will make their teaching flexible and adventurous. And so, the cycle of benefits starts over again.

Description, analysis and interpretation of results

This analysis is based on the interpretation of different perceptions that teachers and students can have about the benefits and limitations of teaching and learning English in small classes.

The five teachers that collaborated with this research were all young and enthusiastic; they seemed to be motivated in their teaching practice. All of them followed a routine in class to lessen anxiety in the students and made clear the objectives of the class and what they expected from the students during the class period.

The ninety two students were from 12 to 15 years old. They seemed to have a good relationship with the teacher and this factor contributed to the easy development of the activities planned. They had a clear understanding of the rules they were supposed to follow during the class period, which is a factor that lessens disturbing behaviors and inappropriate interactions.

Both groups were asked to answer the same questionnaire generating the following results.

Qualitative and quantitative analysis

What are the benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes?

The benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes were measured through seven aspects for teachers and eight for students.

Table 1

Teachers' perceptions

N	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	It is easier to design activities that help students to apply what they have learned.	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	5	100
2.	The students are attentive and participate in class activities.	3	60	2	40	0	0	0	0	5	100
3.	Classroom space allows students to properly do the activities designed.	5	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	100
4.	Appropriate feedback can be given.	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	5	100
5.	Activities that allow more interaction among students are performed.	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	5	100
6.	There is more interaction between the teacher and the students.	5	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	100
7.	It is easier to remember students' names.	5	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

Table 2
Students' perceptions

N	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	The activities done in class help to apply what students learn.	52	57	38	41	2	2	0	0	92	100
2.	The students are attentive and participate in class activities.	32	56	52	35	8	9	0	0	92	100
3.	The students can better concentrate because there is less noise in the classroom.	45	49	28	30	19	21	0	0	92	100
4.	The classroom space allows students to carry out the activities assigned by the teacher.	61	66	27	30	4	4	0	0	92	100
5.	Students receive proper feedback from the teacher.	57	62	32	35	2	2	1	1	92	100
6.	There is interaction between students.	58	63	29	32	5	5	0	0	92	100
7.	There is interaction between the teacher and the students.	69	75	21	23	1	1	1	1	92	100
8.	The teacher remembers the students' names.	83	90	6	7	2	2	1	1	92	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

The results displayed in this tables show that 80% of teachers perceived that working in a small class gives them the opportunity and advantage of designing and carrying on activities that allow students practice and show what they have learned in different ways; similarly, more than the half of the students was aware that the activities in class are directed to allow the demonstration of what they have learned. Only 2% of the students interviewed felt that the main purpose of some of the designed activities was not to measure their levels of understanding.

Having less students, teachers can design different types of activities to match students' needs and their individual learning styles. In this way all the students are given the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge they have acquired.

During the whole process of observation in five different classrooms it was clear that the planned activities had the purpose of making students practice what they had been taught. Teachers were working on activities based on a book that students were reading, and those included group work to analyze vocabulary and answer questions to assess critical thinking as well as comparisons and contrasting. Discussions were also carried on, and students were encouraged to ask challenging questions each other as a way to co-evaluate peers. It was noticeable that one teacher took the advantage of including a debate about a main issue in the book to make students practice all the steps they also had learnt about how to organize a debate and take an active part in it. Through all those activities students were assessed, not only in the learned content, but also in the developed skills.

This fact confirms that teachers in small classes can apply multiple strategies to teach and evaluate what has been done in the class as they have the time to establish routines that train their students to work with the teachers' guide before they can do it individually. According to Caplan, & Owings, (2002) teachers in small classes are able to align the curriculum so all their students have the chance to learn the content that will be later evaluated and measured.

While I was observing the management and activities carried out in classes, I could notice that all the activities were based on the assumption of an existing prior knowledge, giving students the opportunity to apply the skills and content that they have already developed and acquired. So, according to Herrell, & Jordan, (2012) this has been confirmed, since they stated

that one of the advantages of learning in small classes is that teachers can model and guide the practice of the content before the students become independent during the learning process.

Most of the activities that teachers have planned included the use and demonstration of specific contents and topics that gave students the security to be able to use them in different contexts and gave the teacher the opportunity to evaluate what had been taught.

According to Bray, & Kehle (2011), when it comes to concentration and participation, class size has a direct effect on both. However, the percentages in this table show that two fifths of the teachers interviewed (almost half of them) do not fully agree with this theory. It does not mean that they are not satisfied with the level of concentration and participation of their students, they just feel that learners can do better. The fact is that for some students at certain age it is really hard to remain focused on tasks, especially if it isn't challenging enough and if the class is not dynamic and interactive. However, 91% of students feel that learning in small classes gives them the advantage of helping them remain focused on tasks and to participate in the proposed activities during the class period. Only eight out of twenty two students don't find it highly possible. These results confirm what Blatchford (2003) indicated about how students in small classes showed being persistent and concentrated due to the teachers' constant help and observation.

What I could witness is that most of the students were attentive and took an active part in the class activities, while others were not fully alert. It can be related with students' personality; no matter how much the teacher insists on their participation and how active some classmates can be, they just prefer listening to others and let them do most of the work.

I could perceive the advantage of working in small classes realizing how teachers were able to walk around the class to make sure every single student was focused on tasks or taking

part in group work or discussions. Having the teacher monitoring all the time forces students to work. Besides, teachers were always asking students' opinions on the topic which also made them be attentive. I could also analyze that most of the students kept on working on the planned activities proposed by the teacher; and only few of them were distracted doing something else. As teachers were able to monitor students, they demanded attention and concentration constantly to those who were not completely involved at that time.

According to the results in this table, most of the students feel that the noise level is low enough to let them work, and only 21% of the students find it difficult, not impossible, to concentrate due to the noise level. Actually, Bray & Kehle (2011) consider the noise level as an important physical characteristic in a classroom that can affect students' performance.

What I could have perceived is that the noise level was acceptable due to the group activities, but I did not find it disturbing in any of the classes that I observed. The level of concentration students showed was not related to the noise but to parallel conversations and some other distractors they had in class including cell phones and head phones.

It is easy to state that 100% of the teachers who participated in this study agreed on that the physical space in the classroom allow the adequate development of the designed activities. However, when it comes to students' perceptions, 61% of them feel really comfortable as the physical space of their classrooms allows the adequate development of the planned activities, while only the 4% of students think that this aspect should be improved. Bray & Kehle (2011) agree with the fact that the physical space is related to the possibility of making students work in groups according to the nature of the activity in order to achieve better results.

As classes in Terranova are physically wide, with twenty students or less, teachers were able to modify seating arrangements and could group students according to the nature of the task

and its level of complexity. I observed that teachers were able to move students easily to make groups or to work individually allowing the teacher to walk around. The physical space and seating arrangement in the different classrooms definitely permitted the functional development of the activities.

During class period teachers managed to make students work individually, in pairs, in groups or to give instructions that had to be followed as a whole class activity.

I clearly noticed that having the appropriate physical space in the classroom gave the five teachers the opportunity to develop all the activities using different interaction patterns. In most of the classes the students had to work individually as well as in pairs or small groups and most of the teachers walked around the classroom providing personalized assistance to some students and also guidance when they were working in groups. This fact confirms what Bray & Kehle (2011) say about the way the physical space and the characteristics of a classroom are related to the students' focus, concentration and results.

Small classes permit teachers to be flexible and adapt also the planned activities to the students' needs and preferences. The physical space in a class offers teachers the advantage to experiment different ways to accomplish a task and make students develop the skills of negotiating, cooperating and organizing time and ideas when they work in groups.

Eighty percent of the interviewed teachers are conscious that working in small classes gives them the opportunity to provide immediate and appropriate feedback to their students. This is a huge advantage of teaching in small classes since teachers can be aware of students' performance and correct them or inform them about their progress. Likewise, only 3% of the students feel that feedback was inappropriate or inexistent, while the rest of the students recognized that teachers are able to provide appropriate and opportune feedback. Actually,

according to Archer & Hughes (2011), feedback is the way teachers respond to students, it shouldn't be conceived only as a correction, but as a way to inform them about their growth and areas that need to be improved.

It was obvious that teachers were constantly monitoring, checking, improving and paraphrasing what students said incorrectly as a friendly, non-invasive way to correct them. Teachers also responded by smiling or nodding, giving the students confidence and support. Results were positive because students became aware of their mistakes or flaws, as well as their strengths; and tension or threaten were never felt in the class environment, which gave the students the confidence of doing a good job and ask for help when needed. An advantage for those students in small classes was the immediate feedback they received from the teacher. During observations, I realized how teachers were all the time guiding students through their process of learning, checking and observing. During speaking activities teachers asked students to clarify or paraphrase the word order to correct mistakes. That technique made students correct themselves without feeling embarrassed in front of the whole class. One of the teachers gave students an achievement scale and a checklist that they had to fill in as self-assessment, this strategy made students be aware of what they were doing and it also gave them the responsibility of assessing their own work and effort.

In fact, according to Bray & Kehle (2011) in small classes the students hardly ever have to wait for support or feedback because the teacher is always concerned about the students' quality of work.

Most teachers take the advantage of working in small classes to plan their activities in order to promote interaction between students. Eighty percent of teachers that were surveyed stated that the activities they had planned allowed more student-student interaction. As they

make students work in groups or pairs, they are encouraging them to cooperate to accomplish a given task. Small classes permit students to interact not only for academic purposes, they also have the confidence to talk to each other and ask for help or clarification, which strengthen and nourish the relationship among them.

The percentages in the table above express that 60% of the students agree with the fact that small classes offer the benefit of increasing the quality and quantity of interactions between peers. This advantage is stated by Bray & Kehle (2011) who found that interactions in small classes had such a high level, that students became supportive, caring and cooperative with their classmates.

I definitely agree with this fact because I could observe that students interacted during most of the class period and they did it in English, which proved that they had been exposed to the language and feel confident to speak. Interactions were based on academic topics, most of them centered in the class activity, but I also perceived that the students had developed good relationships, which is beneficial for the interactions, students' motivation and, therefore their academic achievement.

I could also analyze how students worked together in a cooperative, non-competitive way to achieve a learning goal. Students seemed to be accustomed to work in groups and they were never reluctant to get together with the assigned group or pair, which showed tolerance and acceptance. Small classes offer the students multiple occasions to interact with others, which contributes to their fluency improvement and confidence growth. This fact corroborates what Berns (2010) stated; a small class enables students to interact more often, giving them multiple occasions to understand one another, increasing and improving the learning opportunities.

All the teachers who cooperated with this study agreed with the fact that the class size is directly related to the quality and quantity of teacher-student interaction. This results agree with the ones exposed by Blatchford (2003) who says that teachers in small classes are able to listen to and respond to all students, which gives them the confidence to ask more questions and interact more often. On the other hand, seventy five percent of the students interviewed agreed with the fact that there is a high level of teacher-student interactions. Only 1% of them showed being discontent with the existing interactions. However, I noticed that due to the good relationships that teachers and students have, the interactions were of a high quality; teachers called their students by their names and students called teachers by their names too. Students did not seem afraid to ask for help and teachers were most of the time enthusiastic when offering guidance. That made students feel close enough to ask for help, for extra explanation or extra time, but at the same time, all the teachers managed to be friendly without losing their authority. The classes' environment offered a healthy place for students to learn without being afraid of making mistakes through the process. Teachers and students interacted in a safe, friendly environment that boosted students' performance and kept both teachers and students comfortable and motivated.

This aspect of the five small classes observed was the basis for having and maintaining a safe environment for students to develop the emotional and academic levels. In fact, according to Bray & Kehle (2011) as teachers respond better to students in small classes, interactions tend to be more supportive, creating an encouraging atmosphere that will continue enhancing interactions.

One of the advantages of working in small classes is that the relationship between students and the teacher becomes closer, and one of the causes for this warm and personal

relationship is the fact that the teacher can remember every students' name. The whole group of teachers interviewed in Terranova stated that it was easy for them to remember the learners' names. This is a great way to call their attention in a personalized way and make students feel in a familiar environment, which promotes a better disposition for them to learn and interact. Students' perceptions differ a little bit, since not all of the students, but 90% of them know that their teachers remember everybody's names.

When students are aware of the teacher's interest, they can create and develop a sense of belonging to a group, which is really important to ensure their social and emotional well-being. Something as simple as remembering names and some personal information about students can make them feel important and special, which will increase their motivation as well.

During my observations I could perceive that the way students and teachers treated each other was very informal, but yet respectful. Both teachers and students called each other by their names only; not by last names or degrees. One advantage of working in small classes is that teachers get to know students better, according to Finn & Wang (2002), because teachers can even dedicate time to have one-to-one tutoring and individualized attention; so it is obvious that teachers are going to know not only students' names, but also some of their personal background. However, there is 1% of the students who seemed to disagree with this fact, but, according to what I saw, they are mistaken.

It is clear that small classes have certain characteristics that are beneficial for the teaching and learning process. Teachers and students that work in small classes perceive that due to the class size it is highly possible to plan, and carry out activities that permit students to show what they have learned through a variety of techniques and strategies. Teachers and students interact frequently which gives the latter the security needed to experiment with the language in a safe

environment. Teachers, on the other hand, have the opportunity to assess students and detect who of them needs a special attention and guidance.

What are the strategies and resources that favor the teaching process of English in small classes?

Teachers' and students' opinions about strategies and resources that can be considered as an advantage of working in small classes are analyzed in detail through eight aspects, whose results are shown below.

Table 3

Teachers' perceptions

N	In classes with a small number of students, it is easier to:	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	Design and apply activities that allow students to practice listening skills.	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	5	100
2.	Design and apply activities that allow students to practice speaking skills.	5	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	100
3.	Design and apply activities that allow students to practice reading skills.	5	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	100
4.	Design and apply activities that allow students to practice writing skills.	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	5	100
5.	Design and apply group work activities.	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	5	100
6.	Design and apply individual activities.	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	5	100
7.	Use technological tools.	3	60	2	40	0	0	0	0	5	100
8.	Use didactic material.	3	60	2	40	0	0	0	0	5	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

Table 4

Students' perceptions

N	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	The activities done allow students to practice listening skills.	57	62	30	33	5	5	0	0	92	100
2.	The activities done allow students to practice speaking skills.	55	60	35	38	2	2	0	0	92	100
3.	The activities done allow students to practice reading skills.	62	67	23	25	7	8	0	0	92	100
4.	The activities done allow students to practice writing skills.	62	68	26	28	4	4	0	0	92	100
5.	Group work activities are used.	54	59	28	30	10	11	0	0	92	100
6.	Individual activities are used.	66	72	23	25	3	3	0	0	92	100
7.	Technological tools are used.	46	50	30	33	12	13	4	4	92	100
8.	Didactic materials are used.	49	53	25	27	18	20	0	0	92	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

As displayed in this table, the 80% of the teachers believe that the opportunity to design, apply and develop listening skills is highly offered when working in small classes. The other 20% find this chance also satisfactory. This results reflect the fact that listening activities can be carried out frequently in small classes, not only as planned activities, but also as a daily routine since students are exposed to the instructional language every day. Similarly, only 5% of students do not agree with the fact that small classes allow the planning of activities directed to develop listening skills.

If we think of listening activities only as those in which students listen to tapes or conversations to answer comprehension questions, then 5% of students is right. But if we

conceive listening and respond to instructions, listening to debates and discussions and taking an active part in them as activities that also develop listening skills, they are wrong.

I perceived that speaking and listening activities were always linked and developed on a daily basis.

Even though teachers perceived that it is extremely possible to develop listening skills, any of the classes analyzed were working with listening-centered activities. Nonetheless, I observed that as students were demanded to talk, discuss and share ideas, the listening skill was developed. Besides, although the activities were all student-centered, teachers took also part in discussions and they also gave instructions which most of the students listened to attentively. By listening to others as a part of the class activity, students showed abilities to negotiate, ask for clarification and refute or disagree. Speaking and listening activities appeared to be linked in all the classes observed and students seemed to be accustomed to listen to the others because they responded effectively.

All of the teachers that cooperated with this research agreed that it is possible to apply and design activities directed to develop speaking skills, and 98% of students agreed with them recognizing that small classes allow the development of activities that are oriented to practice and growth of those abilities.

In most of the observed classes, students were asked to take parts in oral discussions, presentations and debates that are always good techniques to work with learners in their development and improvement of oral fluency, enhancing their ability to communicate effectively. Besides, I realized that speaking activities were part of the daily communication between students and between themselves and the teacher. As Berns (2010) says, as the number

of students decreases, the participation in discussions increases, and this way students develop their speaking skills.

Students looked comfortable speaking English with their peers, with the teacher or in front of the class, which was one of the evidences that oral activities belong to a daily part of English language classes at Terranova. Something noticeable was that all of the teachers demanded oral interactions in English only; mother tongue was only allowed under extreme circumstances. During all speaking activities students took turns to talk and respected each other without making fun of themselves or criticizing. Having speaking activities as a part of a daily routine creates the appropriate environment to lose the fear of making mistakes and boosts students to experiment with language. This security will have a positive effect on interactions, making them higher and richer.

All of the teachers and 67% of the students who cooperated with this research think that working in small classes offers them the advantage to design and apply activities to develop reading skills easily.

From all the observed classes, three fifths of them were based on activities with a book that students were reading, which included critical thinking, comparison and contrast, description of characters, recalling main idea and details. However, any activity during the class period included reading in class, so I could not see how reading was managed in the classroom because students were supposed to read at home some chapters as a pre requisite for the class activity. Nonetheless, students showed having developed the reading skills since they were able to support ideas, discuss and think critically.

According to the results displayed in the table above, 80% of the teachers and 68% of the surveyed students found it viable to take the advantage of working in small classes to design and apply activities oriented to help students practice and develop writing skills.

Despite the fact that most of the teachers managed to carry out activities that involved the development of the four basic language skills without focusing on one specifically, it was noticeable that students were capable to write well organized paragraphs, summaries and also take notes on speeches and discussions. In four fifths of the classes observed, teachers assigned a part of the class period to make students write about a given topic. Most of the writing activities were designed to be accomplished individually and teachers evaluated grammar structures, connection between ideas, paragraphs' organization, and creativity among some other criteria. This made me realize that the writing skills were developed accurately, because students were able to work independently showing security and domain of the tools needed to write in a clear and effective way.

Four out of the five teachers surveyed found it very likely to design and apply group activities; so did 59% of the students. However, 11% of the latter do not perceive that the amount of group activities planned was enough.

Most of the classes that I observed included group activities, and it seemed that students were accustomed to work in that way because they were fast in organizing the groups and effective in the accomplishment of the tasks. One of the advantages of working with small classes is to make students work in little groups or with peers to achieve a common learning goal. Many tasks can be designed to be developed as a group activity and teachers can join students according to strengths and weaknesses, which give the former opportunity to offer special assistance to those groups that need it the most. This confirms what Herrell & Jordan (2012)

stated about how group work is not only a strategy, but also a way of enhancing cooperative learning. According to these authors group work offers students the huge advantage of improving and increasing interactions among them. For this purpose, students must be able to negotiate, infer and ask for clarification; all of those skills that can be better developed while the interaction between peers is a common core.

I witnessed how most of the classes observed included group activities as a part of the planning. Students joined together to analyze texts, to share ideas and opinions and to write summaries about a given topic.

A small class allows a flexible teaching which includes a variety of strategies and techniques that allow teachers reach their teaching goals. A well balanced class should include not only group work, but also individual activities. To this concern, only 3% of the students think that the individual activities applied in class are not sufficient; while the rest of the students stated to be satisfied with the amount of independent work that is developed in a small class; and 80% of the teachers find it highly conceivable to design and apply individual activities.

In fact one of the greater advantages of working in small classes is to give students the opportunity to work on their own since teachers are going to be able to assess and grade every individual work. This strategy gives students the chance to manage their learning and forces them to be attentive in order to reach academic goals. Working alone demands higher levels of commitment and concentration, together with the ability to communicate and demonstrate what has been learned.

Individual work gives teachers a real picture of what students have understood and learned about a topic because this type of activities are done without any peers' help, so when assessing individual activities, teachers receive a very real feedback on their teaching.

When observing classes, I realized that teachers were able to monitor every student's individual work, which would have been impossible in a large class. As teachers get to know students very well, they can identify who of them need intervention and guidance. Due to small number of students, teachers were able to check and response to students' work immediately; this way students were clear about what had to be improved.

I detected that there was a balance between the group and individual activities, and the latter were carried out as a closure of a group activity. In some cases, especially linked with writing, the individual activities were a major part of the class period.

Percentages show that 60% of the teachers found it possible to use technological resources when teaching in small classes. However, according to my observations any of those teachers used technology in their classes, except for registering assistance which is not an academic activity. In the same way, half of the interviewed students felt very satisfied with the amount of use of technological resources in the class, this group of students, together with the 33% that found it satisfactory, show that in general, most of the students feel comfortable with this aspect.

The use of technological resources for teaching purposes can become a great advantage of making the classes more dynamic and of catching students' attention. However, during my observation stage, any of the teachers used those resources in the class period; which I considered as a waste since they had the access to them in all of the classes.

The outcomes displayed in the table show that 60% of the surveyed teachers thought that working in small classes made it possible to use didactic material, so did 53% of the interviewed students, while only a 20% of them found the use of didactic material in the class quite satisfactory.

The use of didactic material is something that can happen in both small and large classes. What makes the difference between both is the possibility for teachers to make material to be used in planned activities. The use of didactic material as the materials used for self-teaching can be more feasible in small classes, since the number of students allow this probability, which implies a benefit of the learning process.

However, I had the chance to observe that teachers and students were only using different types of reading books and school supplies, but not any other material to help learners understand or deepen their knowledge.

All the information above demonstrate how teachers and students perceived that small classes allow teachers to apply strategies and resources that favor the teaching and learning of English, because a class with a reduced number of students permit teachers to help learners to develop and improve the four basic language skills. The size of the class also affects the flexibility of teaching. Teachers can demand students to change interaction patterns and seating arrangement depending on the learning goal; they can ask students to work independently or in group according to the nature and complexity of a task. This strategy helps them to develop social skills, increasing the quality of interaction and boosting cooperative work.

On the other hand, teachers and students had a different perceptions about the use of technological resources and didactic material in the class. While teachers thought that a small class gives them the opportunity to use those resources and materials, students did not find it satisfactory.

What is your opinion about the way students feel when learning English in small classes?

Teachers' and students' perceptions about the way students feel through their learning process in small classes are examined through the interpretation of the four questions below.

Table 5

Teachers' perceptions

N	In classes with a small group of students,	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	They are relaxed when speaking in front of their classmates.	3	60	2	40	0	0	0	0	5	100
2.	They are taken into account by the teacher because they have more opportunities to participate in class.	5	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	100
3.	They are motivated to participate because of the small number of students.	3	60	1	20	1	20	0	0	5	100
4.	They are at ease because they can healthy compete with their classmates.	3	60	0	0	2	40	0	0	5	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

Table 6

Students' perceptions

N	In classes with a small number of students,	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	I am relaxed when speaking in front of my classmates.	50	54	33	36	6	7	3	3	92	100
2.	I am taken into account by the teacher because I have more opportunities to practice in class.	54	59	35	38	2	2	1	1	92	100
3.	I am motivated to participate because of the small number of classmates.	45	49	35	38	10	11	2	2	92	100
4.	I am at ease because I can healthy compete with my classmates.	50	54	34	37	7	8	1	1	92	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

The type of interactions and relationships that can be developed in a small class contribute to the confidence of students to feel relaxed and, therefore, speak freely in a second language. According to Blatchford (2003) small classes offer a warm and encouraging atmosphere that gives students confidence.

The results for the first item in this table show that 60% of the teachers perceive that their students feel relaxed at the moment of talking in front of their peers. When it comes to the students' perception, most of them recognized that when they have to talk in front of their classmates, they feel relaxed. Only 3% of them find it threatening to speak in front of the class.

This minority feeling of threat can be associated with the fact that few of the students who come from other schools are not accustomed to the high level of oral fluency that most of the students in Terranova have, and this can generate anxiety. However, what I could perceive is that

the learning environment was safe, full of respectful, non-judgmental classmates. That students were not nervous to talk in front of their classmates due to the friendly learning environment in which they had the opportunity to learn and develop skills. I witnessed how they interacted with others using English most of the time and they did not even hesitate or showed fear to be the center of attention.

This analysis is related to what Bray & Kehle (2011) say about the environment in small classes. These authors proved that as interactions in these types of classes are warm, supporting and caring, the social/emotional aspect is going to be benefited as well, allowing students to feel relaxed when they have to talk in front of their peers.

All of the teachers and most of the students in this research agreed on the fact that a small class offers students the opportunity to take an active part in the class. Only 3% of the interviewed learners are not satisfied with this aspect.

These results confirm what Bray & Kehle (2011) stated about how students in small classes initiate discussions and how frequently they participate.

However, what I could observe was that even though all of the students had the chance to participate actively, not all of them were willing to take the risk of playing a part in the class. The small number of students offers the advantage of greater opportunities for interaction and oral expression, but some students needed to be prompted and even kind of forced by the teacher to contribute in discussions and some other activities that demanded them to share ideas. If it remains true, that the less the students are, the higher interactions will be, the students' personality can play against their real opportunity to participate. It is clear that some people learn better by listening than by talking and forcing students too much can become a disadvantage.

Some students in the classes I observed seemed reluctant to take an active part, but as soon as the teacher intervened, students did not oppose to participate. Besides, due to the small number of students in the classes I observed, they have constantly the chance to participate actively in all the class' activities, and when some of them did not seize that opportunity, teachers found the way to make them get involved in the activities. In fact, according to Bray & Kehle (2011) having the teacher constantly concerned about students' development gives them the confidence to ask more questions, to take more risks, and; therefore, to participate in class.

Students' involvement is closely related to their motivation, and due to the characteristics of small classes, enthusiasm tends to be higher. In this aspect, 75% of teachers were very satisfied with the level of motivation their students show, which can make the formers feel rewarded and motivated as well. Similarly, 87% of the students recognized they felt motivated in their classes, and having students aware of this is a huge advantage for teachers who can use this motivation to enrich the learning process through more challenging tasks. Caplan & Owings (2002) say that teachers need to plan different activities to catch students' attention and keep them motivated, because when students feel interested in doing something, their motivation increases; and this is an advantage in small classes.

I perceived that motivation in the class was more related to the subject content, the topic and even the relationship students had with the teacher, more than with the class size. Motivation also relies on the relationships between students and Berns (2010) agrees with the fact that good interactions between students are going to boost motivation as a consequence.

During my observations I could also realize that the class size had a positive effect on the students' attention and involvement during class activities, which I think it reflects their motivation in the class. The majority of the students were focused on task and were very attentive

to what the teacher required. Having a small group of students allowed the teachers to have more control over their behavior and involvement, which forces students to remain focused. However, the fact that students were focused on a task and alert during the class period does not imply that all of them were interested in taking part of the discussions. Teachers demanded attention and students were expected to participate and contribute during the planned activities, but not all of them were motivated to do it. It seemed that motivation is also related to personal characteristics, interests and the chemistry students feel toward a teacher and among them.

The types of interaction that occur in a small class can affect the level of security in students. In this concern, 54% of students and 60% of teachers thought that students feel comfortable because they can healthily compete with others. In other words, students in small classes cooperate instead of competing; this fact demonstrates that students have a good relationship with others and that they learn in a cooperative environment.

The classroom environment that takes place in small classes offers students the advantage to feel safe to show what they know and to be willing to cooperate with others to accomplish a task and reach learning goals.

During observations, it was clear that students were not competing with others to impress the audience, they simply gave their best as a personal interest to take an active part in the class and to express ideas and thoughts. Any of them were judgmental towards others, they did not make fun of others' mistakes or corrected peers in order to feel superior. They showed having a good relationship reflected in their cooperative, non-competitive skills. This corroborates what Bray & Kehle (2011) say about how teachers in small classes perceive their students become cooperative, caring and willing to support their peers instead of competing with them.

I observed that as most of the time students were asked to work in groups, they had developed social skills and communication skills; they understood the benefits of being team players. Students did not compete, they cooperated, which is more beneficial. In fact, according to Herrell & Jordan (2012) small classes offer the benefit of developing cooperative learning as a way in which students interact, communicate and work together to reach learning goals.

After all the stated above, it is clear teachers and students perceive that due to the class size students feel more relaxed, participative and confident. As interactions are constant and students take an active part in most of the tasks, they feel relaxed in front of their classmates and confident too. Motivation is the aspect that appears to be less related to the class size.

What are the possible limitations of teaching English in small classes?

The teachers' and students' perceptions about the possible limitations of teaching English in small classes are interpreted through the two questions detailed below.

Table 7

Teachers' perceptions

N	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	There is anxiety among students because there is more control from the part of the teacher.	1	20	1	20	1	20	2	40	5	100
2.	Listening and speaking skills are more difficult to develop.	3	60	2	40	0	0	0	0	5	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

Table 8

Students' perceptions

N	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree		Agree		Partially agree		Disagree		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	There is anxiety among the students because there is more control on the part of the teacher.	39	42	34	37	13	14	6	7	92	100
2.	Listening and speaking skills are more difficult to develop.	35	38	29	31	19	21	9	10	92	100

Author: Ana Lucia Ramos Ponce

Source: Colegio Terranova

The results in this table show a divided manner of perceiving the way students feel about teachers' control in small classes. For two out of five teachers the level of students' anxiety generated by the teachers' over control is almost null. However, other teachers perceived an increasing anxiety due to the teachers' pressure or excessive monitoring during class activities. Likewise, a combined amount of 79% of students seemed to feel anxious because teachers have the possibility to check and control constantly not only behavioral aspects, but also academic outcomes. This teacher's over control that can take place in small classes is not always well received by learners.

Students' fear may be a disadvantage of working in small classes. As teachers work with a reduced group of students, they are able to demand more of them, they are also aware of what happens in the classroom and know who is focused on a task and who is not. According to Finn & Wang (2002) small classes are characterized by an increased individualization, which implies greater teacher's control; it is obvious; therefore, that what can be an advantage for teaching purposes, may become a disadvantage for the learners in terms of the anxiety it might produce.

I perceived that students were conscious of being constantly observed and that fact pushed them to remain focused which was clearly an advantage for teachers and ensured the accomplishment of tasks. Nonetheless, teachers perceived that for some students it could imply the loss of their freedom and some kind of pressure that made them feel uncomfortable.

However, according to my observations students did not seem to feel nervous or uncomfortable with the teacher's constant presence, they appeared, though, anxious while waiting for the teacher's validation and approval.

The results for the last item in the questionnaire show that three out of five teachers think it is difficult to practice listening and speaking skills in small classes. Nonetheless, during the

whole process of observation I could realize that listening and speaking activities were carried out on daily basis. One of the benefits of working in small classes is that teachers can plan activities like discussions, debates, etc. that develop both skills since students need to understand what others say in order to give opinions or argument their ideas. Students in small classes are exposed to greater amounts of listening materials that they have to decode and understand. They have to listen for main ideas and listen for details; they also have to communicate orally to show what they have understood or learned.

When it comes to students' perceptions the table shows divided opinions students have about the difficulty of practicing listening and speaking skills in small classes. However, most of them seemed to agree that it is difficult to practice those skills. This perception lacks of validity as most of the students agreed that the activities applied in class are oriented to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The analysis from the observations confirmed that it was easy to practice listening and speaking skills.

According to teachers' and students perceptions working in a small class has some limitations, since a reduced number of students will not guarantee the absence of anxiety. In fact it seems that as teachers are able to monitor students constantly, their angst tends to increase. Similarly, teachers and students agree with the fact that a small class will not offer facilities in the practice of listening and speaking skills, which is not in concord with their perceptions about the way a small class can favor the teaching and learning process through different strategies that tend to improve the four basic language skills.

Conclusions

The results analyzed show that teachers and students share the perception that working in small classes guarantees a benefit for teaching and learning English. Both groups agree with the fact that working in small classes consents the possibility of carrying out activities that allow students to practice what they have learned, which gives students the opportunity of remaining focused on tasks because they understand the content.

This research demonstrates that a small class has a positive effect on the classroom environment. The class becomes a safe and supporting place where students can learn and develop reading, writing, speaking and listening skills throughout different types of strategies oriented to help learners accomplish academic goals.

This research implies that interactions among students and between students and teachers are a factor that is closely related to students' motivation. Healthy supporting and caring interactions help students to increase their confidence to take an active part in the class; and they also help teachers to manage the classroom effectively.

This research reveals that the physical space of a classroom is closely related with the opportunity teachers have to change interaction patterns giving the class a dynamic that can guarantee students' involvement. This change from individual to group activities offers students the opportunity to learn from one another, increases the amount of interactions, as well as the occasion to work cooperatively to accomplish a task.

In most instances teachers working with a small group of students are able to monitor them constantly and, therefore, offer learners immediate and appropriate feedback, which increases the level of anxiety students feel. However, the results in this research show that feedback is beneficial for students because they are receiving information about their

performance regularly. As a consequence, they are aware of their weaknesses and strengths and work on the areas that need improvement.

Results demonstrate the importance that teachers and students give to the emotional aspect involved in the learning process. Small classes have been proven to offer a healthy and friendly learning environment that makes students feel safe and allow them to experience acceptance and a sense of belonging to a group.

Small classes permit teachers to remember students' names which provokes a sensation of being special and being taken into account. This situation has a positive effect in students' involvement and accomplishment.

Recommendations

There is strong evidence that teachers' strategies and techniques are related to students' engagement and achievement. It would be beneficial if teachers planned their activities using technological resources to make their classes more active, dynamic and interactive.

It is recommended to give teachers support and training on how to create and use didactic material to improve their teaching and, therefore, students' learning. Didactic material could benefit students to understand abstract concepts that theory cannot explain accurately.

Different teaching strategies should be included besides grouping learners or let them work individually; teachers should take into account learning styles and the different intelligences students have to plan activities that can benefit them equally.

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ANNEXES



UNIVERSIDAD TÉCNICA PARTICULAR DE LOJA

La Universidad Católica de Loja

OPEN AND DISTANCE MODALITY

ENGLISH DEGREE

Dear student,

The aim of this brief questionnaire is to obtain information concerning *your opinion in relation to the learning of English in small classes*. The following information will only be used for academic/research purposes.

Informative data: Please fill in the information below

Name of institution :			
Type of institution:	Public ()		Private ()
	School ()	High school ()	Language institute ()
City:			

Instructions: place an (X) in the box that best reflects your personal opinion:

Strategy: answer the following questions as honestly as possible based on the following criteria.

Totally agree
Agree
Partially agree
Disagree

A. Benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes.

	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
1.	The activities done in class help to apply what students learn.				
2.	The students are attentive and participate in class activities.				
3.	The students can better concentrate because there is less noise in the classroom.				
4.	The classroom space allows students to carry out the activities assigned by the teacher.				
5.	Students receive proper feedback form the teacher.				
6.	There is interaction between the students.				
7.	There is interaction between the teacher and students.				
8.	The teacher remembers the students' names.				

B. Strategies and resources that favor the English teaching in small classes.

N°	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
9.	The activities done allow students to practice listening skills.				
10.	The activities done allow students to practice speaking skills.				
11.	The activities done allow students to practice reading skills.				
12.	The activities done allow students to practice writing skills.				
13.	Group work activities are used.				
14.	Individual activities are used.				
15.	Technological tools are used.				
16.	Didactic materials are used.				

C. Students' feelings when learning English in a small class.

N°	In classes with a small number of students,	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
17.	I am relaxed when speaking in front of my classmates.				
18.	I am taken into account by the teacher because I have more opportunities to participate in class.				
19.	I am motivated to participate because of the small number of classmates.				
20.	I am at ease because I can healthy compete with my classmates.				

D. Limitations of learning English in small classes.

	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
21.	There is anxiety among students because there is more control on the part of the teacher.				
22.	Listening and speaking skills are more difficult to develop.				

Thank you.



UNIVERSIDAD TÉCNICA PARTICULAR DE LOJA

La Universidad Católica de Loja

OPEN AND DISTANCE MODALITY

ENGLISH DEGREE

Dear teacher,

The aim of this brief questionnaire is to obtain information concerning *your opinion in relation to the teaching of English in small classes*. The following information will only be used for academic/research purposes.

Informative data: Please fill in the information below

Name of institution :			
Type of institution:	Public ()		Private ()
	School ()	High school ()	Language institute ()
City:			

Instructions: place an (X) in the box that best reflects your personal opinion:

Strategy: answer the following questions as honestly as possible based on the following criteria.

Totally agree
Agree
Partially agree
Disagree

A. Benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes.

	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
1.	It is easier to design activities that help the students to apply what they have learned.				
2.	The students are attentive and participate in class activities.				
3.	Classroom space allows students to properly do the activities designed.				
4.	Appropriate feedback can be given.				
5.	Activities that allow more interaction among students are performed.				
6.	There is more interaction between the teacher and the students.				
7.	It is easier to remember students' names.				

B. Strategies and resources that favor the English teaching in small classes.

N°	In classes with a small number of students, it is easier to:	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
23.	Design and apply activities that allow student to practice listening skills.				
24.	Design and apply activities that allow students to practice speaking skills.				
25.	Design and apply activities that allow students to practice reading skills.				
26.	Design and apply activities that allow students to practice writing skills.				
27.	Design and apply group work activities.				
28.	Design and apply individual activities.				
29.	Use technological tools				
30.	Use didactic materials.				

C. Students' feelings when learning English in a small class.

N°	In classes with a small number of students,	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
31.	They are relaxed when speaking in front of their classmates.				
32.	They are taken into account by the teacher because they have more opportunities to participate in class.				
33.	They are motivated to participate because of the small number students.				
34.	They are at ease because they can healthy compete with their classmates.				

D. Limitations of learning English in small classes.

N°	In classes with a small number of students:	Totally agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
35.	There is anxiety among students because there is more control from the part of the teacher.				
36.	Listening and speaking skills are more difficult to develop.				

Thank you



UNIVERSIDAD TÉCNICA PARTICULAR DE LOJA

La Universidad Católica de Loja
MODALIDA ABIERTA Y A DISTANCIA
TITULACIÓN DE INGLÉS

HOJA DE OBSERVACIÓN

INSTITUCIÓN	
EDUCATIVA:	
FECHA:	
CURSO/NIVEL:	

1. Se realizan actividades que permiten poner en práctica lo aprendido.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

2. Todos los estudiantes están atentos y participan en las actividades desarrolladas en clase.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

3. El espacio de la clase permite desarrollar adecuadamente las actividades asignadas por el profesor.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

4. El profesor brinda una retroalimentación adecuada debido al poco número de estudiantes en la clase.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

5. Existe interacción entre los estudiantes.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

6. Existe interacción entre el profesor y los estudiantes.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

7. El profesor recuerda el nombre de los estudiantes.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

8. Se realizan actividades que permiten practicar la habilidad de **escucha**.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

9. Se realizan actividades que permiten practicar la habilidad de **habla**.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

10. Se realizan actividades que permiten practicar la habilidad de **lectura**.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

11. Se realizan actividades que permiten practicar la habilidad de **escritura**.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

12. Se utilizan actividades **grupales**.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

13. Se utilizan actividades **individuales**.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

14. Se utilizan recursos tecnológicos.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

15. Se utilizan materiales didácticos.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

16. Los estudiantes se muestran relajados al momento de hablar frente a sus compañeros.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

17. Los estudiantes tienen mayor oportunidad de expresarse.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

18. Los estudiantes se muestran interesados en participar en las actividades realizadas en clase.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

19. Los estudiantes pueden competir sanamente con sus compañeros.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

20. Los estudiantes se muestran relajados porque no hay mucho ruido en el salón de clase.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

21. Los estudiantes se muestran tensos debido a que existe mayor control por parte del profesor.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

22. Se dificulta realizar habilidades de habla y escucha.

SI () *NO* ()

Notas:

