

## Teachers and students' perceptions of teaching and learning English in small classes: a case of Ecuador

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### ABSTRACT

The English language teaching learning process in small classes may turn challenging for some teachers but also rewarding because of the results obtained. In our country, the majority of high schools have a big number of students in the English courses and this may be one of the causes for language low achievement. For this reason, this study is aimed at exploring teachers and students' perceptions on the benefits, strategies and resources, students' feelings, and the possible limitations the teaching and learning of English in small classes may yield to promote changes in the number of students in Ecuadorian English classrooms. The findings show that small classes help teachers design, apply activities, use strategies, and resources that make it easier for students to interact, participate, and receive appropriate feedback. Regarding students, they feel relaxed and motivated to learn English among few students; however, the fact that teachers' control of the small class allows them to address students more frequently, make students feel anxious.

**KEYWORDS:** small classes, teachers and students' perceptions, benefits, strategies and resources, students' feelings, limitations

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most common obstacles that English teachers face in Ecuadorian high schools is the amount of students per class, which may have a positive or negative influence on the teaching and learning of the English language. The average number of students per class in public high schools is 40. In this sense, teachers make efforts to improve their teaching skills in order to overcome problems that appear in relation to the assigned class size. According to Harmer (2007) large classes present bigger challenges than small ones. But working with small groups may imply a necessity to overcome some specific challenges since as it is stated by Schreiner (as cited in Zayed 2016) working with small classes increases student anxiety. Despite the fact that the problem mainly lies on large classes, this study focuses on small classes. For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to identify teachers and students' perceptions of the benefits, strategies and resources, students' feelings, and the

possible limitations in teaching and learning English in small classes. These results will be presented to our society as a contribution for the improvement of this field.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Small classes**

Deciding on the appropriate number of students in an English class has been discussed by field experts for some time. According to Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles (2003) cited in Bray and Kehle (2011), when a class has less than 20 students, it is considered to be a small class. In fact, most EFL instructors prefer teaching groups of about 15 students which is similar to the above mentioned number. Folger (1989) cited in Bray and Kehle (2011) highlights that the benefits of small classes are reflected in students' learning behaviors; students' social behaviors; and student-teacher interactions. Regarding students' learning and social behaviors, students demonstrate more academic commitment which results in higher achievement. In addition, the author states that small classes provide opportunities for more active students' participation in regards of discussions and question-answer activities. In relation to student-teacher interactions, Folger (1989) reports that there are more opportunities for personalized instruction which helps to identify students' weaknesses.

Likewise, Exley and Dennick (2004, p. 3) state that "in a small group, students can be encouraged to talk, think, and share much more readily than in a large group. Communication is at the heart of small group teaching of any kind and a crucial first step is the willingness of the students to speak to the tutor and to each other." In addition, the authors claim that teachers benefit from small groups because they can provide feedback to all students; this support can be given during whole group or individual performance by providing advice on personal problems or in any issue that students may face.

### **2.2 Managing learning in small classes**

Success in the teaching-learning process involves different aspects; it goes from the design and implementation of good and flexible lesson plans to the application of accurate classroom management strategies.

The current literature review focuses on some of the aspects that are more relevant at the moment of teaching a lesson; aspects such as: instruction, feedback and timing. Regarding instructions, Harmer (2007) assures that there are two general rules that teachers have to consider when providing instructions because they must be as simple and clear as possible, and they must be logical. Nunan (1996) highlights that providing clear instructions is an ability that teachers have to develop to improve ESL, and EFL learners' performance.

Consequently, before an instruction is given, teachers have to consider students' previous knowledge, the message they want to convey, and the order in which the information must be used and presented; afterwards, the teacher must confirm students' understanding by requesting a student to explain the activity to be performed.

The time set for students to complete tasks is also an important aspect in managing learning. In this sense, Levin and Long (1981) have identified a subdivision. First, allocated time which is the space of time that teachers consider enough to develop the activity. Second, time on task which is the amount of time that students are engaged during the assigned task. Finally, academic learning time that is the moment in which learners develop the activity, and reach a high level of productivity.

Another aspect that is relevant to be included in managing learning is feedback; to this regard, Harmer (2011) states that in order to increase motivation, and enhance learning environment, it is important to provide feedback to students. In this sense, Ackerman and Gross (2010), affirm that both positive and negative feedback lead to successful performance. The authors highlight that the nature of feedback is negative since it focuses on the weak points of students' performance and motivates improvement. On the other hand, Ackerman and Gross point out that positive feedback emphasizes on positive aspects of an assignment which will increase students' sense of achievement, but it is important to consider that pupils will not improve much if they only receive positive feedback.

### **2.3 Learning environment in English classes**

Dornyei and Murphey (2003, p. 77) have emphasized that being creative and flexible in the classroom build a relaxing learning environment; for instance, the arrangement of desks promotes interaction and communication which at the same time conveys powerful effects on students' participation, leadership opportunities and affective potential of group member. The authors highlight that it is not easy to suggest an ideal seating arrangement since it will depend on the purpose and needs.

In the same regard, Harmer (2001) states that the physical appearance of the classroom and the emotional atmosphere of lessons have positive results on students' motivation to learn. Thus, it is important to present an attractive classroom that generates an appropriate atmosphere where students can work on different activities without having problems when moving around the classroom if working individually or in groups. In the same fashion, Zubizarreta (2010) states that the environment in small classes allows collaboration, mentoring, active learning, and community building which are benefits used by teachers and learners to reach their goals.

#### **2.4 Strategies and resources to teach English**

Regarding strategies, Robert, Kaplan, and Richard (1997) affirm that the use of the target language, group work and pair work are considered useful strategies that contribute to enhance communication in small classes. Another technique suggested by Wilbert and Marilla (2010) is discussion which can be used with any group size but it is more effective when used in smaller classes. By applying discussions, students are expected to integrate, apply, and think. These skills allow teachers to understand students' point of view.

#### **2.5 Teacher-student, and student-student interaction in small classes**

According to Exley and Dennick (2004) teaching small groups allow instructors to boost students' interaction. By interacting, students share their opinions and help each other understand difficult concepts and explanations. In addition, Johnston (1990) (as cited in Bray and Kehle, 2011) states that small classes let students have frequent interaction with their teachers. As a result of the interaction among teachers and students in small classes, Zahorik (1999) (as cited in Bray and Kehle, 2011) explains that students get positive outcomes which increases enthusiasm and self-confidence.

#### **2.6 Previous Studies**

Previous studies have been devoted to discover whether or not small classes benefit English language teaching and learning. Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown, and Martin (2006) conducted a longitudinal research design study aimed at determining the effects of class size on teaching in English primary schools of pupils aged 8-11 years. The sample for this study involved 202 schools, chosen by stratified random sampling. The data was gathered by using a multi-method approach, integrating qualitative information from teachers' end-of-year accounts and data from case studies with quantitative information from systematic observations. The authors concluded that there was more individual attention in smaller classes, a more active role for pupils, and beneficial effects on the quality of teaching.

A similar study conducted by Din (1999) focuses on the functions and benefits of small classes to both teachers and students. For the purpose of this study, full-time teachers with five or more years of experience in a school district were selected. A questionnaire that contained open-ended questions related to Chinese rural teachers' perceptions regarding class size was applied to each of the selected teachers. The results permitted to reach to the conclusion that Chinese rural teachers think that there is not a relation between class size and student achievement. Nevertheless, they consider that small classes promote classroom management, interaction between teacher and students, and personalized feedback from teachers; and reduce teachers' working time.

Harfit (2012) conducted a small-scale exploratory study that aimed at examining whether and how class size reduction might help to alleviate language learning anxiety, which has long been seen as an obstacle to second language acquisition. To develop the study, the author applied multiple case studies in 4 Hong Kong secondary schools. Each case study involved one teacher teaching English language to first language Chinese students in a reduced-size class and a large class of the same year grade, and of similar academic ability. Multiple interviews were applied to four teachers and 231 students. Students' interview focused on their perspectives and experiences of studying in large and reduced-size classes. The research findings revealed that students' sense of anxiety can be reduced in smaller classes.

Galton and Pell (2012) conducted a study with the purpose of establishing the benefits of teaching in a small class. In addition, the study sought to find if there was improvement in the student's participation and quality of teaching in a reduced class. For this research, 37 primary schools participated voluntarily. In order to gather the information, the sample was divided in 3 cohorts that were observed and recorded in a 3 year period. During the first 2 years, reduced classes were chosen to be observed. In the last year of the study, both normal and reduced classes were observed. In addition to the observation, researchers recorded the student-student and student-teacher interaction. The authors concluded that students in small classes do not get more of the teachers' complete attention, than students in regular classes. Also, teacher-student interaction in normal classes is really brief compared to interaction in small classes where interaction is longer.

### 3. METHOD

#### Participants

This study was conducted in Ecuador. The sample consisted of 1146 students and 84 teachers from three regions of the country, Coast, Highlands, and Amazon. The participants belonged to different schools, high schools, and language academies where English is taught as a foreign language. The sample included learners from diverse socio-economic status.

#### Procedures

A mixed method research design was selected to conduct this study. In order to collect the data, 2 instruments were designed, a questionnaire for teachers and students; and an observation sheet. The questionnaires were designed in English and were aimed at gathering teachers and students' opinions regarding the teaching and learning of English in small classes in Ecuador.

The observation sheet included questions to support what teachers and students answered in the questionnaires. These questionnaires and the observation sheet were validated by experienced teachers. Secondary researchers of around the country were trained in order to apply these instruments.

### 4. ANALYSIS

Table1: Teachers and students' perceptions of teaching English in small classes in Ecuador									
Description		Teachers' perceptions				Students' perceptions			
		Totally disagree	Disagree	Agree	Totally agree	Totally disagree	Disagree	Agree	Totally agree
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Benefits of teaching and learning English in small classes	1. The designed activities help students to apply what they have been taught.	2.44	2.44	31.71	63.41	0.88	5.1	39.93	54.09
	2. The students are attentive and participate in class activities.	2.44	3.66	32.93	60.98	1.32	12.05	50.75	35.88
	3. Classroom space allows students to properly do the activities designed.	3.66	6.1	30.49	59.76	1.58	7.3	37.03	54.09
	4. Appropriate feedback can be given.	2.44	3.66	31.71	62.2	1.85	8.88	35.88	53.39
	5. Activities that allow more interaction among students are performed.	2.44	6.1	26.83	64.63	2.64	8.27	40.55	48.55
	6. There is more interaction between the teacher and the students.	2.44	1.22	30.49	65.85	1.32	5.54	30.87	62.27
	7. It is easier to remember students' names.	2.44	2.44	24.39	70.73	1.23	7.39	23.48	67.9
resources that favor the English teaching	8. Design and apply activities that allow student to practice listening, speaking, reading, writing skills.	0.31	4.27	29.56	65.85	1.3	7.72	33.07	55.43
	9. Design and apply group work activities.	0	3.65	34.14	62.19	1.85	11.96	37.82	48.37
	10. Design and apply individual activities.	1.22	3.66	21.95	73.17	1.5	6.07	32.1	60.33

	11. Use technological tools	3.66	12.2	30.49	53.66	11.26	2.9	32.54	34.3
	12. Use didactic materials.	0	10.98	30.49	58.54	5.36	18.56	37.03	39.05
Students' feelings when learning English in small classes.	13. They are relaxed when speaking in front of their classmates.	1.22	6.1	43.9	48.78	2.9	10.47	36.94	49.69
	14. They feel part of the class because the teacher gives them more opportunities to participate.	1.22	1.22	20.73	76.83	2.11	9.94	37.82	50.13
	15. They are motivated to participate because of the small number of students.	1.22	7.32	28.05	63.41	1.5	10.2	38.87	49.43
	16. They are at ease because they can healthy compete with their classmates.	0	4.88	30.49	64.63	2.02	9.41	37.82	50.75
Limitations of learning English in small classes.	17. There is anxiety among students because there is more control form the part of the teacher.	12.2	26.83	46.34	14.63	11.52	21.11	37.38	29.99

Findings in table 1 reveal that an important number of teachers 63.41% and 31.71% totally agree and agree in relation to item 1. In the same way, 54.09% of students totally agree and a 39.93% of them agree on the fact that the activities applied in classes help students to practice what they have been taught. These results indicate that the small number of students in the class allows teachers to design activities that enhance students to move from theory to practice, thus reinforcing their knowledge; resulting in the achievement of English language goals. On the contrary, 2.44% of teachers totally disagree and disagree respectively and a small percentage of students 0.88% totally disagree and 5.1% disagree. These results indicate that a small amount of students believe that they do not benefit from the activities their teachers apply during the lessons because of the level of difficulty of the types of activities used do not allow learners to improve their knowledge of the English language.

The positive results obtained in item 1 were also confirmed through classroom observations where most of the activities used were well designed considering the contents studied during the lessons and the different learning preferences; that is the reason why students seem to be motivated and feel confident to participate. These findings are supported by Folger (1989) cited in Bray and Kehle (2011) who argue that students in small classes participate in activities such as discussions and question-answer providing them opportunities for applying what they have learned. Similarly, Exley and Dennick (2004) claim that students may be engaged in activities that allow them to talk, think and share. Through this strategy they can demonstrate their competence in the English language.

In regard to item number 2, the results presented in table 1 show that 60.98% and 32.93% of teachers totally agree and agree respectively. Similarly, students' responses show that 50.75% and 35.88% of them agree and totally agree on the fact that in small classes, students respond attentively and with enthusiasm to the planned activities, they are keen to participate with more confidence with their peers. In contrast to these positive results, table 1 also shows that a small percentage of teachers 3.66% and 2.44% disagree and totally disagree, in that order; in the same perspective 12.05%, and 1.32%, disagree and totally disagree respectively to the aspects mentioned above. In addition to the results above, the class observation evidenced that classrooms with a small number of students allow teachers to manage the class better and also facilitate students to actively participate in



class, and be attentive most of the time during the lesson. In regard to students' responsiveness and willingness to participate in small classes, Exley and Denneck (2004) emphasize that in small classes, teachers can easily motivate students to think and share among them and participate in class. Regarding motivation, Zahorik (1999) (as cited in Bray and Kehle, 2011) emphasizes that when students get positive outcomes, their enthusiasm and self-confidence boosts. Besides, the authors emphasize that communication is inherent to small classrooms. Based on the aforementioned information, teaching in small classes not only promotes students motivation but also enhances enthusiasm and self-confidence; therefore, it is more productive to work with small classes.

As it can be seen, 59.76% and 30.49% of the teachers agree and totally agree respectively on the statement presented in item 3; likewise, a high percentage of students (54.09% totally agree and 37.03% agree) perceived that in classrooms with a low number of students, the space can be used effectively for different activities. There is enough room to arrange seats in different ways which at the same time suits the performance of a variety of activities. On the other hand, a low percentage of teachers (3, 66 % totally disagree and 6, 1% disagree) and a low percentage of students (1.58% totally disagree and 7.3% disagree) think that classroom space does not influence in the performance of activities in small classes. In addition to the above results, through the observations, it was evidenced that students were eager to collaborate when teachers asked to arrange seats according to the activities. These results are supported by Dornyei and Murphey (2003, p. 77) who highlight that the arrangement of desks promotes interaction and communication which enhances students' participation, leadership opportunities and group work.

As it is observed, 62.2% of teachers totally agree and 31.71% of them agree with the issue stated in item 4. Comparably, 53.39% of students totally agree and 35.88% of them agree on the fact that in classes with a small number of students it is possible to provide effective and timely feedback as part of the learning process. As a result, students benefit from small classes since teachers have enough time to address personal students' mistakes by giving them immediate feedback favoring meaningful learning. These results are aligned with Harmer's ideas (2011) who states that in order to promote motivation, and to enhance learning environment, it is important to provide feedback to students. On the other hand, a small percentage of teachers, 3.66% disagree and 2.44% totally disagree, and a similar small percentage of students, 8.88% disagree and 1.85% totally disagree on the fact that appropriate feedback is given. In addition to the above mentioned results, the observation corroborated that teachers give appropriate feedback in classes with a reduced number of students by solving each student concerns. In this sense, Ackerman and Gross (2010), affirm that both positive and negative feedback lead to successful performance. The authors highlight that the nature of feedback is negative since it focuses on the weak points of students' performance and motivates improvement. On the other hand, these authors point out that positive feedback emphasizes on positive aspects of an assignment which will increase students' sense of achievement, but it is important to consider that pupils will not improve much if they only receive positive feedback.

The results show that in item five 64.63% of teachers totally agree, and 26.83% of the teachers agree on the fact that carrying out activities in small classes allow more interaction amongst students. Moreover, the results also show that 48.55% of students totally agree and 40.55% of students agree on the same fact. In this regard Exley and Dennick (2004) state that interaction increases in small classes because students are able to share their thoughts and help each other when facing difficulties. At the same time, results in item 5 show that 2.44% of the teachers totally disagree and 6.1% disagree on this same item. Furthermore, 2.64% of students totally disagree and 8.27% disagree on the fact that activities in small classes permit interaction among students. These results concur with the class observation where the majority of students had the opportunity to share ideas and participate in discussions; while just a few number of students did not participate at all when working in groups. Indeed, they did not use the target language at all.

Regarding item 6, there is more interaction between teachers and students when working in small classes, the statistical analysis provided the following results; 65.85% and 30.49% of participant teachers totally agree and agree, correspondingly. In the same line, 62.27% and 30.87% of participant students totally agree and agree, in that order. Conversely to positive results, table one shows that a small percentage of teachers and students do not agree on the fact stated in item 6. In this sense, 2.44% and 1.22% of teachers totally disagree and disagree, respectively; likewise, 5.54% and 1.32% of students disagree and totally disagree, correspondingly.

It is important to highlight that the statistical results presented above are closely related to the anecdotic data gathered during the class observation, in which it was evident that interaction between teachers and students was more frequent and productive in the sense that teachers were able to personalize the information.

Not only statistical results and observation data confirm the increase of interaction between teachers and students in small classes, but also authorities in the field highlight the fact that students interact more frequently with their teachers in small classes (Johnston, 1990 in Bray & Kehle, 2011). The improvement of interaction in small classes takes place among students, and also between teachers and students. In the first case, the interaction is a means to share information and support learning while in the case of student teacher interaction, the teacher use it to encourage students participation, as Exley and Dennick (2004) concluded. From all of the evidence, it is clearly inferred that small classrooms become an appropriate environment for interaction to take place.

As shown in item seven, 70.73% and 24.39% of teachers totally agree and agree respectively. A similar percentage of students, 67.90% and 23.48% totally agree and agree. These results suggest that a big amount of teachers and students consider that learning students' names in small classes is not a problem because a small group of students make the task of learning students' names easier. On the contrary, a small percentage of teachers (2.44% totally disagree and disagree respectively) while 7.39% and 1.23% of students totally disagree and disagree. From the observations conducted, it was encountered that in most of the lessons, teachers call students by their names. It was also evident that calling students by their names is a good strategy that provides some benefits in the classroom; for example, the students who participated in this study feel more comfortable and confident during the development of each activity.

The statistical data obtained from teachers in item 8 show that 65.85% and 29.56% totally agree and agree respectively; this is confirmed with students' data, 55.43% and 33.07% totally agree and agree on the fact that in small classes, teachers can design and apply activities that allow students to strengthen the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. On the other hand, a low percentage of teachers, that is 4.27% totally disagree and 0.31% disagree and a similar tendency among students that represents 7.72% who totally disagree and 1.3% who disagree correspondingly. In addition to the above results, the class observation evidenced that classrooms with a small number of students offer an appropriate environment to develop the four skills but mainly the speaking skill because all students have the same opportunities to participate in the activities which is challenging when teaching large classes. To this respect, Ur (1996) states that speaking is the most important skill among the four language skills because people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language. Thus, students in small classes are exposed to a vast amount of practice that help them to achieve the communicative competence.

With regard to item 9, findings show that 62.19% and 34.14% of teachers totally agree and agree respectively. Regarding students responses, 48.37% and 37.82% of them totally agree and agree correspondingly. These results signify that a large percentage of teachers and students consider that group work activities are easy to develop in small classes. On the other hand, a small percentage of teachers 3.65% disagree and 1.85% and 11.96% of students totally disagree and disagree on the fact that group work activities are applied in small classes. In addition to these results, the observations conducted in the sample classrooms confirm that most of the activities applied during the lesson are developed in groups where students can have more opportunities for verbal interaction, they help each member of the group to accomplish the assigned tasks and enjoy participating in every group work activity. In this respect, Robert, Kaplan, and Richard (1997) claim that group work is an excellent strategy that benefit teachers and students in small classes in the sense that communication is enhanced.

Results in item ten show that 73.17% of teachers totally agree and 21.95% agree that designing and applying individual activities favor the English teaching in small classes. In addition, 60.33% of students totally agree and 32.1% agree on the same fact. Contrary to the previous results 1.22 % of teachers totally disagree and 3.66% disagree on the fact that designing and applying individual activities favor the English teaching in small classes. A similar tendency was obtained from the students in which 1.5% of them totally disagree and 6.07% disagree. Contrasting the results with the observations, it can be affirmed that making students work on individual activities allows them to give more thought, participate and express their ideas; thus, favoring English learning.

Results in table 1, item 11 demonstrate that 53.66% and 30.49% of teachers totally agree and agree respectively with the fact that small classes allow the use of technological tools. Similarly, 34.3% (totally agree) and 32.54% (agree) of students agree with this fact. On the other hand, 3.66% and 12.2 % of teachers (totally disagree and agree respectively) do not consider that technological tools are used in small classes to teach English; likewise, a low percentage of students (11.26% totally disagree and 2.9% disagree) have the same perception. These results have been supported by the observations done in the classrooms where technological resources such as laptops, cd players, digital books, and overhead projectors were used to present the different topics as well as to involve students in a wide variety of activities. The use of technology provides positive advantages; for this reason, Bonilla and Espinoza (2014) suggest its use in order to make students be more interested in the subject, to decrease the time that is spend in learning , and to offer more opportunities to learn in untraditional ways.

In regard to the use of didactic material, the results obtained in item 12 are the following: 58.54% and 30.49% of teachers totally agree and agree respectively on the fact that it is easier to use a variety of didactic materials in a small class; this fact is corroborated by 39.05% of students who totally agree and 37.03% of students who agree. In contrast to these positive results, 10.98% of teachers totally disagree as well as 5.36% and 18.56% of students (totally disagree and disagree) consider that small classes do not favor the teaching and learning of English by using didactic materials. The observations confirmed the results provided by the majority of teachers and students since didactic materials such as flashcards, pictures, dictionaries, photocopies, posters, maps, and books were used to teach different contents.

Considering that speaking skill is one of the most difficult skills to be developed; in the current analysis, item 13 aims to prove if the statement ‘In small classes, students are relaxed when speaking in front of their classmates,’ is right or wrong. Taking as the base the information gathered from the statistical report, it is seen that 48.78%, and 43.9% of teachers totally agree and agree, respectively; in the same regard, 49.69% and 36.94% of students totally agree and agree with the fact that ‘In small classes, students are relaxed when speaking in front of their classmates’. On the other hand, 6.1% and 1.22% of teachers disagree and totally disagree to the fact that ‘In small classes, students are relaxed when speaking in front of their classmates;’ in the same line, 10.47% and 2.9% of students disagree and totally disagree on the statement being analyzed. In regard to the influence of class size on the development of the speaking skill, it is stated that a small class is the perfect place for learners to develop willingness to improve their speaking skills (Yashima, 2002). The results of the current analysis plus the fact presented by the expert on the field have contributed to confirm that ‘in small classes, students are relaxed when speaking in front of their classmates.’

In the case of item 14, the trend is that the majority of the teachers, that is 76.83% of them, totally agree and 20.73% who agree on the fact that small classes favor students’ language learning because they can be provided with more opportunities to participate in class. These opinions are corroborated by students’ perceptions since 50.13% of them totally agree and 37.82% agree that in small classes there is more likelihood of student active participation in the learning process which fosters a high level of energy and enthusiasm in the classroom learning environment. It is evident that in small classes it is feasible to ask each student to participate. The percentage of teachers who totally disagree and disagree on the statement posted in item 14 is only 1.22%; the same happens with the students who totally disagree since it reaches only 9.94% and the ones who disagree is only 2.11% who consider that in small classes they do not feel part of the class because teachers do not provide them equal opportunities to participate. The class observations corroborated what was mentioned by the majority of students because it was evident that students feel part of the class because the teacher is constantly calling on their names for interactive participation. According to Harfitt (2015) it is clearly noticeable that small classes seem to be characterized by more collective identity through increased participation.

Motivation is a crucial aspect in the teaching learning process of the English language; motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic, and it can be triggered by many different factors: affective, physical, among others. In the analysis of item 15 from the current study, the influence of a physical aspect in the motivation to learn English is observed: ‘Students are motivated to participate because of the small number of students.’

In regard to the fact stated in item fifteen, an amount of 63.41% and 28.05% of teachers express that they totally agree and agree, in that order, on the fact that students are motivated to participate because of the small class size. The same positive results are seen on the student’s side 49.43% and 38.87% of students responded that they totally agree and agree respectively on the fact that students feel motivated to participate because of the small number of students. Conversely to positive results, it is seen that 7.32% and 1.22% of teachers disagree and totally disagree on the fact that students are motivated to participate because of the small number of students. In the same sense, 10.2% and 1.5% of students disagree and totally disagree, to the statement being analyzed, accordingly. In regard to small classes as an aspect that motivates students’ participation, Exley and Dennick (2004, p. 3) state that in small groups, “students can be *encouraged* to talk, think, and share much more readily than in a large group.” The authors also state that “Communication is at the heart of small group teaching of any kind and a crucial first step is the *willingness* of the students to speak to the tutor and to each other.”

All in all, it can be assured, based on the information above, that there is a direct relation between motivation and number of students in class which means the smaller the number of the students, the higher the degree of motivation, and vice versa.

With respect to item 16, 30.49% and 64.63% of teachers totally agree and agree and 37.82% and 50.75% of students totally agree and agree respectively on the fact that small classes provide an adequate environment in which students can healthy compete. On the other hand, 4.88% of teachers disagree and a small percentage of



students 2.02% and 9.41% totally disagree and disagree respectively. The positive results obtained in this item were verified with the observations performed in the classrooms where teachers apply activities in which students can healthy compete. While the activities were performed, it was perceived that students work collaboratively and the different groups compete in a healthy environment. As it is stated by Zubizarreta (2010), the environment in small classes allows collaboration, mentoring, active learning, and community building which help teachers and students to accomplish their goals.

Nevertheless, working with a small number of students can also generate students' anxiety as it is demonstrated in the results obtained in item 17 which show that 14.63% of teachers totally agree on the fact that in small classes students are more controlled, which may them feel anxious when working in the classroom, and 46.83% of them affirmed that they agree. Comparing these results with students' perceptions, it was found that 29.99% totally agree and 37.38% agree; on the contrary, 12.2 and 26.86 of teachers totally disagree and disagree while 11.52% and 21.11% of students totally disagree and disagree that there is anxiety among students because there is more control from the teachers' side. During the class observations, it was confirmed that some students do not feel comfortable in small classrooms due to the fact that the teacher monitors them all the time. It is aligned with Schreiner (as cited in Zayed 2016) point of view who states that working with small classes increases the level of anxiety in students.

## CONCLUSIONS

Teaching English in small classes provide more benefits than limitations. Teachers have the opportunity to apply varied resources, strategies, and activities that involve working in groups or individually. They allow students to put into practice what they have been taught in a more interactive manner without worrying about space limitation. Another benefit is that students feel more confident to interact among them because of the sense of empathy and respect that builds up in small classes; additionally, communication between students and teachers becomes at ease because teachers are capable to personalize feedback which helps to increase students' sense of belonging. On the other hand, it was found that small classes increase students' anxiety when they feel that teachers control or monitor them all the time which inhibits them at times. This represents a limitation to be considered for further studies.

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