

The Pros and Cons of Teaching a Small-Sized Class

By

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Abstract

It is well known that there are a lot of varied factors that affect the proceeding and succeeding of the teaching process. One of these factors is the size of the class which, in this paper, refers to the number of the registered students in the class, not to the space given to the students in the classroom. This paper discusses the pros and cons of teaching a prominently small-sized class. Unexpectedly, the researcher found that this experience is not associated only with the advantages- pros; she found that this experience has some disadvantages- cons as well. The advantages of teaching a small class are mainly the easy management, individualization, and communication, and the disadvantages are mainly the lack of varied ideas and attitudes and the vulnerability of cancelling. In conclusion, the researcher believes that the creative instructor can take the maximum benefit of the advantages and overcome the disadvantages.

Key words: cons; pros; small-sized class; teaching

Introduction:

Teaching is considered a complicated process in which many factors contribute its success or its failure. Mondal (2015) points out seven factors that may affect the learning process; these factors are the following: intellectual factor, learning factors, physical factors, mental factors, emotional and social factors, teacher's personality, and environmental factor. Mondal comments on the environmental factor by saying that the condition in which learning takes place affects the efficiency of learning. The environmental factor covers the aspects that are related to the physical conditions needed to support the teaching and learning process, e.g., campus supplies, equipment, and the size of the classroom; in this paper, the size of the classroom refers to the number of the registered students in each section of the course, not to the physical space provided in the classroom.

Theoretical Review

Locastro (1989) found that the students prefer the class that has 10-20 students, and the instructors prefer to have 19 students in each class. The instructors pointed out that having 39 students; problems began to show up, and having 51 students is impossible. On the other hand,

the instructors pointed out that having 7 students in each class is uncomfortable and having 4 is impossible. Locastro suggested a logical compromise by having 25 students in each class.

ACTFL (2012) states that:

“Since the goal of a standards- based language program is to develop students’ ability to communicate, there must be opportunities for frequent and meaningful student-to-teacher and student- to- student interaction, monitored practice, and individual feedback during instructional time.

Therefore, while ACTFL recognizes the fiscal realities faced by schools and institutions of higher education, ACTFL supports the recommended class size of no more than 15 students, made by both the National Education Association (NEA) and the Association of Departments of Foreign languages (ADFL). Since the most important consideration in determining class size should be pedagogical efficacy, ACTFL’s position applies to both traditional and online classroom settings. Where larger class sizes exist, teachers must be provided with additional support in order to maintain sound pedagogical practices.”

In fact, having a reasonable number of students in each class helps the instructor to apply and implement Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) seven good practices in undergraduate education that are the following: encouraging contact between students and faculty, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, encouraging active learning, giving prompt feedback, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning.

Research Question:

This paper aimed at answering the following question: ‘To what extent is teaching a prominently small-sized class associated with pros and cons?’

Method

The participants of the study were eight male students, at the undergraduate level, who were enrolled in English I course, which is one of the General Education requirements. And the instrument of the study that was used by the researcher to collect the data is the observation of the students during the running of the sessions and the indications and insights of the results of the students in their formative and summative assessments; it is worth mentioning that the researcher herself was the instructor of that course.

Results and Discussion

Each institution of higher education has its own policy regarding the size of the classes; such a policy has to take into consideration the importance of communication between the instructor and the students as it is the most radical factor in the communicative approach in teaching. The policy of MENA College of Management regarding the class size reads as follows: the maximum number of the students in the General Education courses is 40 students, the maximum number of the students in the IT related courses is 20 students, and for the other courses, the maximum number is 30 students. These items of the policy reflect the maximum numbers of the students in each section which means that a smaller number of registered students is definitely allowed to be

in the class; within this context, it is worth mentioning that there is no policy to control the minimum number of students allowed to be in the section.

The researcher was assigned to teach English language I, which is a general education course, to eight students whose major is Human Resources (HR). At the beginning, she thought that it would be so easy task to teach only eight students, and that all the experience would be full of advantages only, but while the classes were running, she discovered that there were some disadvantages of teaching a small-sized class.

Starting with the white side of teaching a small class, the classroom management was an easy task as the number of the students was a few, and the researcher was on full control over the class; the researcher was able to control all the aside chit-chat among the students, and she was able to control the use of the smart phones and visiting the social media during the running of the class. In fact, using the smartphones inside the classroom is a problem that is faced by the faculty members, in the higher education institutions, as sometimes the instructor is unable to see his students especially at the back side, but when the number of students is small; they will be facing the instructor directly, and accordingly, they can't use their mobile phones. All the literature that presents and discusses the class room management e.g. Sakamoto (2012), Linsin (2014), focus on the obstacles and solutions that are related to a large class size only; and the small class size is totally excluded from this dilemma.

Besides, the researcher had a great chance to focus on each student; especially when she needed to individualize the teaching process. For example, in one of the assignments, the researcher asked the students to write a narrative paragraph, but one of the students was unable to construct well-structured sentences; she had the chance to focus on this particular student and to teach him the structures of the sentences. Zahorik (1999) says that small class size is so promising in the individualized instruction. The researcher was more aware of the strengths, weaknesses, interests, and talents of each one in the class. For example, the researcher was aware that most of the students were so interested in camel racing, so she adopted this theme a lot in her examples and sentences.

Moreover, the researcher was able to apply easily and smoothly the six characteristics of the communicative language teaching that are identified by Brown (2001); the characteristics are the following: 1- introducing the whole components of the communicative competence: grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguist, and strategic, 2- focusing on the pragmatic and functional use of the language, 3- focusing on fluency as well as accuracy, 4- equipping the students with the skills needed to use the language in varied contexts outside the classroom, 5- identifying the learning styles for all the students, and 6- recognizing that the teacher is a facilitator. The chance of communication in that small class was to its maximum; as each one has enough allocation of time; the students were more encouraged to speak up and express their ideas in front of a small group rather than a large group; the students had good chance to participate and to be engaged in the class. The students were encouraged to do their presentations without any embarrassment as the number is small; they didn't face the panic of presenting in front of a big audience.

Furthermore, because the number was small, the instructor was able to grade and mark all the assessments, and to give detailed feedback to the students directly in the following session of the assessment. The feedback was given in the format of oral discussion with each student apart; definitely, the students benefited a lot from the formative feedback. Race (2001) emphasized that

feedback is crucial in all the learning contexts as it develops the competence of the students. The final marks of these eight students were as follows: one got 'A', three got 'B's', and four got 'C's'; the researcher believes that the students would have achieved less grades if they had been taught in a large size class as the group showed a very poor performance in English language in the first week of the semester, but because their number is small, the researcher was able to focus on each particular student and to identify his weaknesses. In light of this, each student had the chance to develop his English language skills through the running of the course, and the course learning outcomes were successfully met.

Chen (2016) pointed out many advantages of the small classes; one of them is that teachers will have time to cover additional and supplementary material and activities.

Hatfield and Media (2016) pointed out that intimacy is a prominent advantage of teaching a small classroom. The researcher does agree with this point as she was able to build friendly relationship with the students during the semester.

In brief, the advantages of teaching a small class are the following: it is easy to manage the class, to individualize the instruction, to communicate and interact effectively with the students, to give prompt and effective feedback, to improve and enhance the academic achievement of the students, to cover more supplementary material to the course, and finally to create the positive and encouraging atmosphere to the students.

Shifting to the negative side of teaching a small-sized class, the researcher missed the variety of ideas, questions, suggestions, and comments; the limitation of the number affected negatively on having a variety of attitudes and norms. Another issue is the group work inside the classroom; the researcher did not have the flexibility to form and change the groups according the student's levels and interests. Besides, the normal distribution of the grades cannot be easily and clearly traced in the small class. Finally, when some of the students did not attend the class, the researcher was obliged to cancel it.

In fact, the researcher's observations, on teaching a small class, are in match with Schreiner (2016) who identified the following disadvantages that are related to teaching a small class: 1- attendance issue: in a small class, the absence of one or two students is a problem as they consist a high percentage of the students; the matter that impedes the progress of the study plan; 2- lack of diversity: a small class doesn't provide the students with the chance to be exposed to a diverse setting; 3- overly rapid work completion: in a small class, the tasks are achieved quickly, preventing the students to take their time to explore the topics; 4- fewer activity options: the small number prevents the implementation of some activities that require a large number of students; and 5- increased student anxiety: some of the students feel more relaxed if they are taught within a large class; such students feel anxious being within a small class. Within the same context, the formal site of *English Club* (2016) presents the following challenges of teaching small classes: 1- Timing: the contents of lessons are covered quickly, so supplementary material is always needed to be prepared, 2-Distractions: pairs are distracted easily because they can hear everything around, 3- Attendance: missing classes can affect the progress of the planned lessons, 4- Fillers: extra activities are always needed in a small class, 5- Boredom: the small class is usually not vivid, 6- Anxiety: shy students do not feel okay in a small class, and 7- Activities not always suitable: some activities need a large number of students. Besides, Stratford (2016) pointed out that teachers, in small classes, do not vary the teaching methods. Away from the educational concerns, Hatfield and Media (2016) pointed out that cost is one of the disadvantages of teaching a small classroom. The insights of the above mentioned disadvantages go with Locastro's (1989) results which

emphasized that having seven students in the class is uncomfortable, suggesting the number 25 to be the model number of students in each section.

In brief, the disadvantages of teaching a small class are the following: it is not easy to vary and enrich the ideas inside the classroom, nor is it easy to form the groups in order to conduct the group work. And the class in this context is so vulnerable to be cancelled.

Conclusion

It has been noticed that teaching a small-sized class, at the undergraduate level, has its own advantages and disadvantages. One would say that despite the fact that there are pros and cons for teaching a small-sized group, it is more manageable to teach a small group than a large one which is really associated with radical disadvantages. Teaching a small group will really be an easy task if the instructor focuses on the advantages, which are many, and tries to overcome the disadvantages, which are a few. *English Club* (2016) gives the following techniques and suggestions that help the teachers to overcome the shortcomings of a small class: fillers, review often, encourage confidence, change the dynamics, and ask for feedback. Finally, teaching a large or small class, the creative instructors make the whole difference in both contexts.

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