

Lun Yeh, M. (2017). Does size matter?: Learners' self-reported perceptions in a small-sized EFL class. *Accents Asia*, 9(1), 77-97.

## **Does Size Matter?: Learners' Self-reported Perceptions in a Small-sized EFL Class**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on three aspects of EFL learning by identifying learners' self-reported perceptions of learning in a small-sized class, as compared with their previous experience in a larger class. The first aspect investigates the learning efficiency of a small-sized class, the second is related to participation in a small-sized class, and the third deals with the benefits of a large-sized class. A questionnaire was administered to 48 freshman college students from two English classes at a technology university in Taiwan to collect data. The results demonstrate that participants generally had a positive attitude toward learning English in a small-sized class. First, concerning learning efficiency, the aspect most favored by participants was the student-teacher interactions in a small-sized class. A high percentage of the participants considered such interactions beneficial to their learning. They also believed that their errors could be corrected in a more timely manner. Second, regarding class participation, they mostly agreed that small-sized classes better prevented cheating in class. Furthermore,

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small-sized classes facilitated greater concentration in their learning. Third, no significant advantage was found for large-sized classes among the participants in terms of sense of security and the joy of being in a large crowd. Finally, the study addresses what areas participants perceived as most improved in terms of learning in a small-sized class. The top three areas were: oral communication ability, pronunciation, and listening, in that order.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Language classes with a large population are the norm and also a concern for many teachers. In most educational contexts in Taiwan, the average class size is around 40 to 60 students. Teachers mostly have the impression that large class size has been the cause to many learning problems. Also, it substantially increases teachers' workload especially if the teaching activities require teachers' attention to individual student. However, the current tendency of English learning advocates interactive activities in class. The interactive teaching activities which are time-consuming especially when they are done in large classes can in fact impose tremendous time pressure on teachers. As such, this situation creates a dilemma for teachers about how much effort and time should be spent on teaching activities without sacrificing the learning progression stated on the teaching syllabus. Lots of previous research into large classes has surveyed instructors' beliefs about the size and problems of large classes. According to Todd (2012), he suggested a threshold level of class size around 25 and 45 students per class, and numbers of students beyond that will make learning drop noticeably.

As many instructors and researchers cited, a large class might bring problems such as classroom management, time allocation on lecturing and activities, interaction issues including fewer opportunities for students to speak and less individual attention. Additional problems can be associated with feedback and monitoring issues where

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teachers were imposed with heavy workload to observe and comment on individual student's work, etc. (Hayes, 1997; Li, 1998; LoCastro, 1989; Coleman, 1989; Todd, 1999; McLeod, 1989; Peachey, 1989). Given the fact that quite a number of teachers believe large-sized classes might adversely affect student learning, how teachers have tried to address the problems is worth an examination. Literature has suggested teachers adopted a global solution using project-based or cooperative learning to minimize the impact of less individual attention in large classes (McDonald, Thiravithul, Butkulwong, Kednoi, 2002; Sarwar, 2001). However, on the other hand, no research evidence confirmed that this kind of global solution can promote student learning. A research by Todd (2012) indicated that there was a correlation between class size and students' scores for EFL classes. It showed that there was a tendency for the students who studied in a larger class to receive a lower grade. He stated that students in larger classes learned less effectively than those who in a smaller one. This view is consistent with the widely supported beliefs from most teachers. However, few relevant studies show hard evidence in the field of second language learning at a university level concerning the relationship between class sizes and learning effect (Slavin, 1989). So far, the arguments on language class size have manifested a great discrepancy and presented some controversial views on class size and students' learning achievements. As such, the purpose of this study is to find out whether there is a correlation between small-sized class and learning effectiveness by soliciting freshman college students' self-report opinions on English classes.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Interaction Hypothesis & Output Hypothesis**

Interactions are an important part of English teaching and learning. In second language classes in particular, the importance of meaningful interactions and the ability to provide feedback to students is paramount to learning (Gass, 1997). Meaningful interactions in promoting English proficiency has been more emphasized these years

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since Long's *Interaction Hypothesis* and Swain's *Output Hypothesis*, which both suggest that interactional deficits particular to large, teacher-centered classes could lead to less effective learning (Long, 1996; Swain, 1985). They both attempted to conceptualize the need for learners to negotiate comprehensible input and the role of their own output in driving their language development.

### **Impacts of Varied Class Sizes**

LoCastro (1989) also argued that there are decrease opportunities for learning in large classes where fewer quality interactions occur. By surveying teacher opinions, his study showed that the pedagogical problems associated with large class size were: (1) more difficulties in carrying out speaking, (2) difficulties in monitoring work and giving feedback, (3) problems with individualizing work, (4) difficulties in setting up communicative tasks, (5) tendency to avoid activities that were demanding to implement. Bosker (1998) asserted that teachers had more opportunities to monitor individual pupils closely in smaller classes in his research with regard to the issues of interaction and feedback; therefore more individualized instruction and assistance during the interactive practices were provided. Camak (2009) also supported the concept of a small-sized class in his study noting that class size was an important dimension in planning and realizing effective teaching. Korostoff (1998) argued that the assessment and evaluation of students was less time-consuming in smaller classes, and provided teachers with more time to focus on pedagogical considerations, rather than marking and grading. These studies showed that class size indeed influences students' learning in certain ways.

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## **METHODS**

### **Participants and Context**

The study focused on three aspects of English learning and class size by identifying students' self-perceptions for English learning efficiency. A class with over 35 students was considered a “large class” in this survey. A self-concept scale was adopted in the study where data were collected from 48 freshman students. The participants were students in intermediate-level English classes at a vocational technology university in Taiwan. The typical class enrollment at the university is around 25 students.

### **Instrument**

The questionnaire, mostly in the form of a Likert five-point scale, was divided into two sections. The first section probed into the basic information giving special attention to the students' top three problematic areas. Also, the students were asked to specify how many students there were in their English classes at high school. The definition of a large class was a population of over 35 students in this survey. Those who did not have the experience of attending a large class were removed since they needed the reference benchmark to respond to the items in the second section accordingly. Furthermore, they were asked how many hours they spent on studying English each week. Those responses were solicited for understanding whether there was a relationship between their learning efficiency and participation in the small-sized class. The second section comprised 14 items that examined three emphasized aspects. The three aspects in the survey were: (1) learning efficiency of a small-sized class, (2) participation in a small-sized class, (3) benefits of a large-sized class. Eleven students responded that their English class at high school had a population lower than 35 people; hence, these subjects' responses were removed since they were not able to compare the differences required in the items from the second section of the survey.

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## **Data Analysis**

The adoption of the 14 items in the questionnaire was a result of factor analysis (direct oblimin) that extracted three factors using the extraction method of principal component analysis. Factor one was associated with learning efficiency of a small-sized class accounting for 38.59% of the total variance. Five items in this category received strong loading ( $>.6$ ), which were items # 4, 6, 7, 8, 9. Factor two is indicative of participation in a small-sized class including items # 1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 12, which carried appreciable loading from .48 to .75. Factor two accounted for 15.32% of the variance. Factor three was representative of the benefits of large classes containing items # 3, 13. Factor three accounted for 10.77% of the variance. Therefore the total variance accounted for was 64.67%. The Cronbach Alpha's coefficient was used and yielded an internal consistency of .827, which was considered acceptable based on the conventionally accepted reliability coefficient of .70.

The items of each factor were interspersed with those of the other in order to make the intended meaning of each factor less obvious to the participants in the survey. Also, the items were written in both negative and positive expressions. For example, *I think there is a negative impact on my willingness to participate in the activities in a large-sized English class* (negative); *I feel more comfortable raising questions in a small-sized English class* (positive). The accumulated statistics of the students' hours of studying English in a week were used to ascertain the correlations of hours spent in studying English and their perceived learning efficiency of a small-sized class. The result obtained in this research was analyzed using SPSS descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The overall responses in the survey showed that the students generally had a positive attitude toward learning English in a small-sized classes (see Table 1). However,

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a large percentage of the participants responded *neither agree nor disagree* for many of the items in the survey. Finn et al. (2003) in their study proved that class size had great effects on students' social and academic involvement in the class. Namely, students in small classes, contrary to their counterparts in large ones, are always under pressure to participate in class activities in a positive sense. Resnick (2003) had a similar view on small class where students encounter continuous pressure to engage in various activities and become active class members. Therefore, attention to learning went up, while off-task as well as other disruptive behaviors went down. As a large percentage of the participants appeared to have no particular preference for small-sized class, this might coincide with earlier research showing discrepant views of the teaching/ learning effect of small-sized classes.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics for Factor 1, 2 & 3

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
1. Learning efficiency of a small-sized class	3.69	.807
2. Participation in a small-sized class	3.28	.870
3. Benefits of a large-sized class	2.85	.812

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### **Learning Efficiency of a Small-sized Class**

Factor 1 consisting of items 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 referred to the learning efficiency of a small class. Table 1 suggested that the participants favored most the interactions with the teacher in a small-sized class (item 8) in this category. They thought the interactions benefited their learning for 73% responding *agree* or *strongly agree*. Students at small classes were engaged in more social interactions with their teachers which gave them less space to misbehave as Finn et al. (2003) suggested in their study in relation to

antisocial attitudes versus class sizes. Also, they perceived that their mistakes could be more timely corrected compared with that at large classes (item 7). According to Miller-Whitehead (2003), small classes allowed teachers to identify problems quickly; thus, remedial solution could be timely applied to eliminate or minimize any possible learning obstacles. The descriptive statistics of Factor 1 is shown in Table 2. Following items 7 and 8, item 6 ranked the third most informative in regards to the participants' opinions of having more practice opportunities in the class. The other two items, item 4 and 9, (#4 “Compared with large-sized class, I feel more comfortable raising questions in a small-sized English class.”/ # 9 “Compared with large-sized class, the interactions I have with my classmates in a small-sized class make me love going to the English class.”) received low mean scores of 3.54 and 3.41 respectively. Given the fact that Taiwanese students are not prone to initiate questions in the class, item 4 showed that the norm of not raising questions could not be changed even in a small class. Item 9 intended to understand whether the increased interactions among students by facilitating more paired or grouped activities in a smaller class could enhance their motivation in attending English classes. 38.8% of them agreed that interactions among peers were an incentive for going to English classes. However, almost 50% of the students responded that they had no particular stance on this. Table 3, 4, 5 revealed the frequencies of items 6, 8, 9 reported by the participants.

**Table 2** *Descriptive Statistics for Items of Factor 1*

<i>Statement No.</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
4	2	5	3.54	.869
6	2	5	3.73	.804
7	3	5	3.86	.751
8	3	5	3.92	.682
9	2	5	3.41	.927

**Table 3** *Frequency for Statement 6*

#6. Compared with large-sized class, I feel there are more opportunities to practice English in a small-sized class.

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Valid	disagree	1	2.7	2.7
	neither agree nor disagree	15	40.5	43.2
	agree	14	37.8	81.1
	strongly agree	7	18.9	100.0
	Total	37	100	

**Table 4** *Frequency for Statement 8*

#8. Compared with large-sized class, the interactions I have with teachers in a small-sized English class make me love going to the English class.

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Valid	neither agree nor disagree	10	27.0	27.0
	agree	20	54.1	81.1
	strongly agree	7	18.9	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	

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**Table 5** Frequency for Statement 9

#9. Compared with large-sized class, the interactions I have with my classmates in a small-sized class make me love going to the English class.

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Valid disagree	5	13.5	13.5
neither agree nor disagree	18	48.6	62.2
agree	8	21.6	83.8
strongly agree	6	16.2	100.0
Total	37	100.0	

## Class Participation

Factor 2 probed into class participation in regards to large and small classes. The implementation of class size reduction in EFL classes presumably has a positive effect on student learning as what is predicted that students themselves prefer to be in classes with fewer students where their participation can increase. However, many participants surprisingly appear neutral on most of the items in this category. To ensure the validity of the survey, as previously mentioned, those who attended an English class under 35 students at high school were removed from the survey since they did not have a reference benchmark to make a fair judgement or comparison between large and small classes. The representative items were items 1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 12. Among all these six items, item 5 received more positive and meaningful responses from the participants. 48.6% of the participants agreed that a small-sized class can better prevent students from cheating in the class. This became the most appreciated advantage of a small-sized class for Factor 2. A large class is usually believed to deprive students' opportunities to practice the target language. Item 1 expected to verify this assumption that the students might have few

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practice opportunities in their previous, larger English classes. However, those who responded they had enough opportunities to practice in their English classes at high school was only 5.4% more than those who believed they did not. More than half of them (51.4%) had no particular opinions on this issue. Furthermore, they did not believe that a large-sized class would impose a negative impact on their willingness to participate in the class activities because the percentage of those who agreed was only 5.4% more than those who did not. According to items 1 and 2, it showed that the participants did not really think a large class would impact their learning negatively. As for whether they were more concentrated in a small-sized class, the result turned out more positive as 45.9% of the students agreed compared with only 2.7% who disagreed.

**Table 6** Descriptive Statistics for items of Factor 2

<i>Statement No.</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
1	1	5	3.00	.913
2	1	5	3.11	.875
5	1	5	3.43	.959
10	2	5	3.27	.804
11	2	5	3.43	.801
12	2	5	3.59	.798

**Table 7** Frequency for Statement 5

#5. Compared with large-sized class, I think it is more difficult for students to cheat in a small-sized class.

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly disagree	2	5.4	5.4
disagree	2	5.4	10.8
neither agree nor disagree	15	40.5	51.4
agree	14	37.8	89.2
strongly agree	4	10.8	100.0
Total	37	100.0	

**Table 8** Frequency for Statement 11

#11. Compared with large-sized class, I feel like contributing more in the activities in a small-sized class.

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid disagree	3	8.1	8.1
neither agree nor disagree	19	51.4	59.5
agree	11	29.7	89.2
strongly agree	4	10.8	100.0
Total	37	100.0	

**Table 9** Frequency for Statement 12

#12. Compared with large-sized class, I can be more focused in a small-sized

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid disagree	1	2.7	2.7
neither agree nor disagree	19	51.4	54.1
agree	11	29.7	83.8
strongly agree	6	16.2	100.0
Total	37	100.0	

### Benefits of a Large-sized Class

The two items in Factor 3 were to learn if any merit was attached to larger classes, as some research has suggested mixed opinions of the advantages of small-sized classes. The two items describe the possible sense of security (item 3) and joyfulness (item 13) of being in a large crowd. More students (35.1%) disagreed with the concept of security in a large-sized class than those who agreed (10.8%). As for item 13, 75.7% of them appeared undecided. Those who either agreed or disagreed were fairly few, so it does not present a significantly meaningful outcome.

**Table 10** Mean Scores for Statements 3 & 13

Statement	3	13
	I feel more secured in a large-sized English class.	I like the feeling of a large-sized class where there are many classmates.
Mean	2.65	3.05
Std. Deviation	.919	.705
Minimum	1	1
Maximum	5	5

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Pearson correlation coefficient was used to find out the relationship between study hours and student perceived learning efficiency of a small-sized class. Item 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 were involved in this analysis with the time students spent in a week on studying ranging from none to six hours at a two-hour increment. 62.2% of them reported the time for studying English was under two hours. It was hypothesized that if students spent more time studying English, they might be able to appreciate the benefits of implementing class size reduction more. However, the result did not prove there was a link between these two variables. It was concluded that the appreciation of implementing class size reduction did not relate to the weekly hours students spent on studying English.

The final issues investigated were: (1) the top three difficult areas in learning English, (2) the top three areas they perceived more improvement in a small-sized class compared with a large-sized class. The participants were required to choose three areas they had problems with in the order of difficulty from seven categories. The most difficult area for them was vocabulary, rated 27.1%, among grammar, reading, speaking, pronunciation, listening, and writing. The second one was grammar receiving 12 votes, accounting for 25% of the total counts. Reading/ writing both secured nine votes, and then ranked in third place. In terms of the most improved areas, the percentage of participants who chose oral communication ability was significantly higher than the other areas reaching 54.1%. As for the second rated improvement, pronunciation received 14 votes which was 37.8% of the total. The third was listening securing nine votes. The ranking for the self-perceived improved areas seem to indicate that class-size reduction seemed to benefit students noticeably in the speaking and listening areas. The impediment of oral production in a large English class was cited by Yu (2004). Her research indicated that college students in large language classes had limited practice for the target language so that the improvement for their level of oral ability was hindered. However, the results here seem to suggest that the participants had enough opportunities to practice English in their previous large class. Nonetheless, they recorded more self-perceived improvements in speaking and listening.

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## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrated that class size was a crucial dimension in realizing effective learning. Generally, the participants responded positively toward most of the items; however, a majority of the items obtained a high percentage of responses of no particular inclination. Judging from the early research in regards to learning effect in varied class sizes, it has been suggested that the lack of links between class size and learning was that the problems reported by teachers or students in surveys may only reflect their perceptions, not necessarily reality (Todd, 2012). Boonmoh (2005) kept a diary while teaching a class of 84 students and found that his initial negative expectations of a large class did not actually manifest themselves. Classroom activities, instructional strategies, and classroom management might also greatly outweigh the effect of class size (Kumar, 1992; Cakmak, 2009). Furthermore, Zahorik, Habach, Ehrle, and Molnar (2003) remarked that class size reduction did not always result in high student performance. Teachers themselves should acquire and practice effective teaching strategies applicable to various class sizes. It is important for them to be flexible and adventurous in applying viable teaching strategies.

Different qualitative and quantitative research methodologies have been used in reference to class sizes such as interviews and observations where teachers play a dominant role in the reporting. However, not only teachers' views but also students' perceptions should be taken into consideration. It is asserted by Camak (2009) that both accounts should be thoroughly examined to understand the advantages and disadvantages of class sizes on learning effect.

Previous findings regarding class sizes present various thoughts where positive and negative correlations between large class size and pupil reactions towards class activities both exist (Galton, 1994, pp. 94-95). The participants' perceptions in this study also

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showed that they generally felt positive about implementing class size reductions though a number of them still appeared to have no particular preference for it.

The limitation of the study is that it is not possible to compare the same group of participants in both large and small class sizes in the context being studied. A comprehensive empirical alternative study in the future could include comparisons of successful and less successful language learners in small classes to understand the differences of their perceptions in the particular context. In addition, not only students' perceptions, but teachers' views should also be included.

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## APPENDIX

### A.

1. Gender:     male     female

2. List three most challenging areas when learning English in the order of difficulty:

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

- (1) Grammar            (2) Reading            (3) Vocabulary            (4) Speaking  
(5) Pronunciation    (6) Listening            (7) Culture            (8) Others (please specify.)

3. How many hours did you spend on studying English other than the regular class time each week? \_\_\_\_\_

- (1) None            (2) 0~2 hours            (3) 2~4 hours            (4) 4~6 hours  
(5) above 6 hours

4. How many people were there in your high school English class before? \_\_\_\_\_

- (1) Under 20 people            (2) 21 to 35 people  
(3) 36 to 50 people            (4) over 50 people

**B.**

	Strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I had enough opportunities to practice English in my previous class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. I think there is a negative impact on my willingness to participate activities in a *large-sized English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. I feel more secured in a large-sized English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. Compared with large-size class, I feel more comfortable raising questions in a small-sized English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. Compared with large-size class, I think it is more difficult for students to cheat in a small-sized English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. Compared with large-size class, I feel there are more opportunities to practice English in a small-sized class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7. Compared with large-size class, I feel that my mistakes can be more timely corrected in a small-sized English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8. Compared with large-size class, the interactions I have with teachers in a small-sized English class make my learning more efficient.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. Compared with large-size class, the interactions I have with my classmates in a small-sized class make me love going to the English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10. Compared with large-size class, I tend not to sit where I am less noticed in a small-sized English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11. Compared with large-size class, I feel like contributing more in the activities in a small-sized class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
12. Compared with large-sized class, I can be more focused in a small-size English class.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Lun Yeh, M. (2017). Does size matter?: Learners' self-reported perceptions in a small-sized EFL class.

*Accents Asia*, 9(1), 77-97.

13. I like the feeling of a large-sized class where there are many classmates.

14. Compared with large-sized class, what are the top three areas that you feel are improved the most?

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

(1) Grammar

(2) Reading

(3) Vocabulary

(4) Speaking

(6) Pronunciation

(7) Listening

(8) Culture

(9) Others

(please specify.)

***A large-sized English class means there are over 35 people in the class.***