

The Influence of Large-Size Classes on English Teachers' Performance

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Abstract

This research was aimed to analyze the influence of large class sizes on teachers' performance in different Educational Institutions in Esmeraldas. A descriptive, qualitative and quantitative investigation was carried out by using the deductive and inductive methods. The participants of this study were female and male full-time English teachers from public, fisco-misional and private Institutions, older than 30 years. They were observed for two weeks and then a survey of ten questions was conducted. The results showed that in classes with more than 35 students, the teaching performance decreases as teachers lack the appropriate knowledge, class time and the suitable conditions to teach to that number of students. It also revealed that teachers' success in managing large classes is not particularly affected by large number of students but for students' disinterest in learning the language. Besides, teachers in large classes have a growing tendency of using more Spanish than English. This research coincides with a number of investigations done related to large classes and teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Key words: Large classes; English teacher's performance; collaborative work

Introduction

Ecuadorians are considered to have a low English level according to the annual reports of the EF English proficiency Index. Regarding this issue, the government has implemented since 5 years ago a set of policies.

The Ecuadorian government has implemented, since 2012, a set of policies to better the English language teaching-learning process in the Ecuadorian educational system. One of them is the Improving English Teaching Project that among other things, offers teachers scholarships to receive training in the U.S. Despite of the Ecuadorian government efforts to achieve a functional level of use of the English language in teachers and students, the progress has been slow.

For that reason, some other factors that have not previously been considered by the government must be reviewed. One of them is class size. The number of students in a class affects the quality of teaching that teachers can offer to students (Blatchford et al., 2002; Hattie, 2005; Pedder, 2006). Having large-size English classes is a reality many teachers have to face and cannot change (Hayes, 1997). Instead, they have to adjust themselves in order to be able to fulfill the educational goals, requirements and needs of students, institutions and the government.

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The influence of large-class sizes in the teaching-learning process has been recently analyzed in Ecuador (Ríos, 2014; Maldonado, 2014; Tutivén, 2015). However, how these classes influence specifically teachers' performance has not.

This situation raises the following scientific problem: How do large class sizes influence English teachers' performance at "Margarita Cortés", "María Auxiliadora" and "Francés" Educational Institutions in Esmeraldas? It also implies some other questions such as: What do teachers consider is a large class in Esmeraldas? How do teachers present the lesson in large class sizes? How do the resources, facilities and time available for teachers affect their effectiveness in large class sizes?

Teaching is the formal transferring of knowledge and experience from one individual to another that occurs in a modified and adapt environment and which the main objective is making learners function effectively in society. For Amidon (1967), teaching is an interactive process that focuses mainly on talking in the class during specific activities. According to Brubacher (1981), teaching is a situation that has been adapted or modified so an individual learn in the course of overcoming it. Skinner (1957) considers "teaching is the adjustment of planning for reinforcement". Ryans (1985) believes teaching is about arranging activities that aim to the learning of others.

Effective teaching refers to a kind of teaching that is successful; it means that it produces learning in students. There are many factors that affect teaching. One of the most important is class size. In a study conducted by Finn et al. (2003), it was revealed that class size affects greatly teachers' personality. However, some studies have concluded that it is teachers' quality and methodology that play an important role in how class size affects the learning process (Maged, 1997; Nakabugo, 2003 and O'Sullivan, 2006).

In the broadest class size classification, classes can be small or large. Small classes influence positively the teaching process (Normore and Ilon, 2006) as misbehaved students are fewer and teachers have enough time to complete their lessons. Miller-Whitehead (2003) states that small classes motivate teachers and decrease discipline problem. She also concluded that these classes help teachers to identify and solve problems quicker. On the other hand, Mulryan-Kyne (2010) defines a large class as "a class that is too large for effective teaching to occur". Teaching in large classes reduces the pace, depth and breadth of curriculum coverage that teachers can achieve because they use significant part of their time in non-academic activities such as managing students' behavior (Hayes, 1997). However, Locastro (1989) suggested that for effective language teaching to occur in large classes, teachers must use an appropriate set of methodologies and practices.

Method

This was a descriptive, qualitative and quantitative investigation that used the deductive and inductive methods. The participants of this study were 8 female and male full-time English teachers from public, fisco-misional and private Institutions, older than 30 years. They were observed for two weeks and then a survey of ten questions was conducted. These teachers were from Esmeraldas-Esmeraldas and had at least one class of more than 35 students. All the information gathers throughout the survey was processed by using the percentage manual method.

Two techniques were used, observation and a self-report survey. The observation form analyzes teachers' performance according to aspects such as subject matter management, teaching methods, students management, among others. The self-report survey consisted in 15 questions to find the most common problems, preferences, advantages and disadvantages teachers admit to have while planning and teaching in large classes. The fourth first questions were aimed to find out English teachers' opinions, feelings and knowledge about teaching in large class-sizes. Question five, six, seven and eight were about how teachers adapt the topics, educational goals and activities (strategies, techniques and methods) provided by the government. Questions nine, ten were about teaching instructions and students' achievement.

Results

The results of the observation revealed that most teachers showed a good command and knowledge of the topics they were teaching; however, they often made mistakes related to pronunciation and English language structures. Teachers over 35 were usually not through with each lesson despite of showing subject matter preparation; they used most of their time in non-academic activities such as controlling students' behavior. Teachers with less than 20 students showed to have a closer and better relationship with students as they had more time for one-to-one interaction.

Most teachers evidenced a lack of variety in the use of methods, being repetition the commonest used; classes were noisy; students at the back usually had problems listening to the teacher's explanation and instructions; students got easily distracted and started to talk about topics not related to the class and/or to do the homework of other subjects.

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Teachers were less flexible to accept bad behaviors and late work when they were from large classes. Besides, it is seen that teachers in larger classes usually do not have time to assist students as frequently as they do it in smaller classes.

Teachers' self-confidence would decrease as the number of students grew bigger. It was also noticed that classrooms in general lack any kind of technological equipment and appropriate materials to teach English.

When the teachers were asked about their criteria concerning the number of students in a large class, as can be seen in figure 1, the majority of them consider a large class size as having 35 students and more. It means that they are aware of this concept.

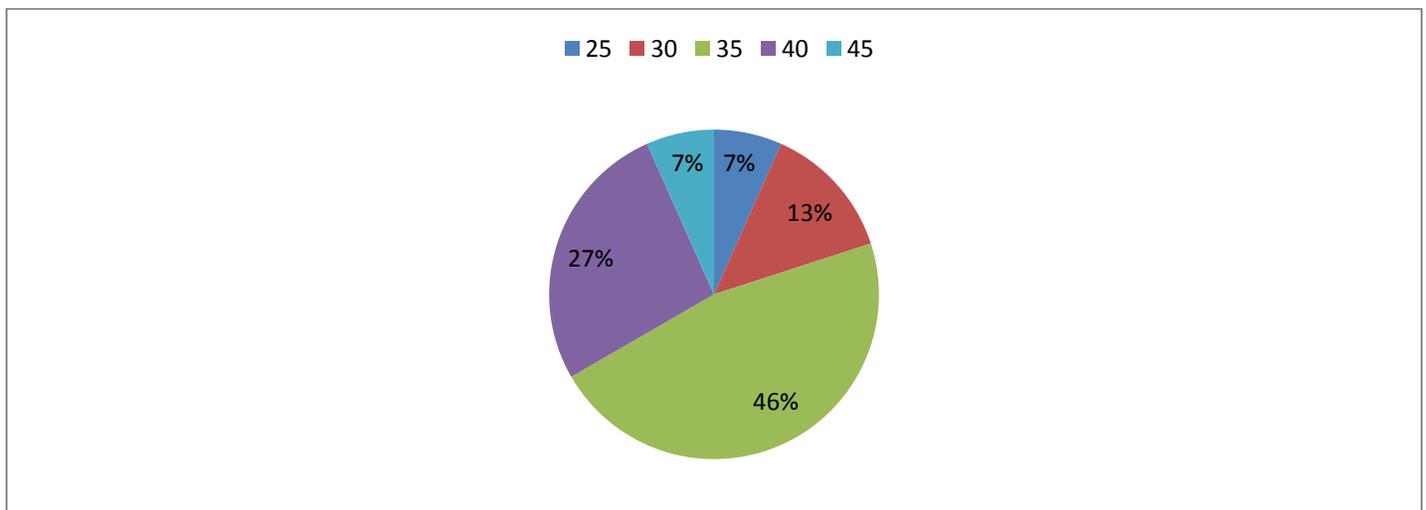


Figure 1. Teachers' criteria about the number of students in a large class
Source: survey applied to teachers

According to the teachers' perception of what a large class size is, 44% of them have at least 6 large class sizes. It is important to highlight that 6 is the maximum of classes by week a teacher can have in Ecuador. That means that most of the surveyed teachers think all of their classes are large. Another 25% of participants believe they have 5 large classes; there are also 13% of teachers who have three large classes, as shown in figure 2.

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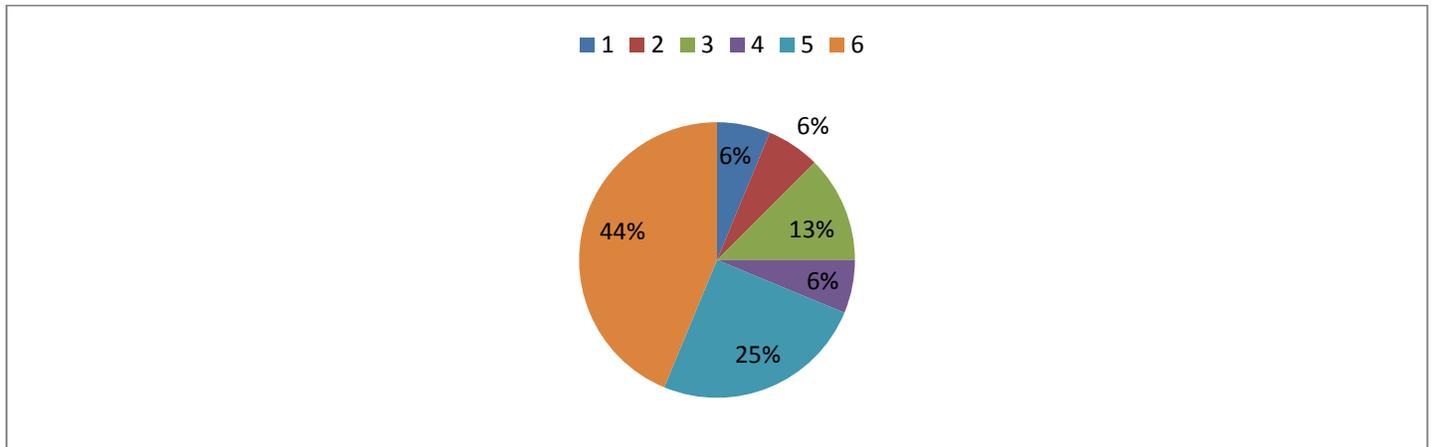


Figure 2. Total of large classes surveyed teachers have
Source: survey applied to teachers

In relation to teachers' feelings about large classes, they were not generally positive, as illustrated in figure 3. The majority of participants expressed feeling unsatisfied while teaching in large classes. A 23% feel fine in large classes, so the large number of students is not something they feel affect them personally. However, no teacher expressed large classes can actually make them feel accomplished. The rest is divided into a 15% of teachers who feel satisfied in these classes and another 15% who do not feel so good in them.

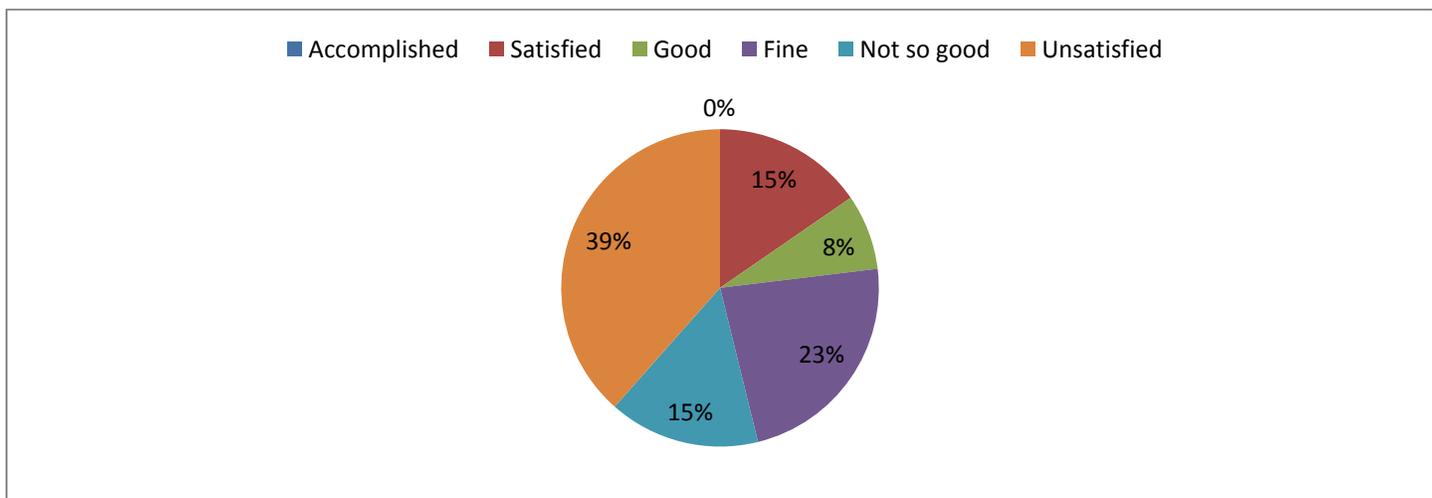


Figure 3. Teachers' feelings about teaching in large classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

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Regarding teachers' management in large classes, figure 4, 50% of them refer teaching superficially in large classes. Based on the observation results, it is noticeable that teachers do not think that with low English level student's it is possible to teach all the topics deeply. Besides, they must follow the curriculum and cannot choose the topics they believe are more important and skip the ones that are not. So, considering the short time they have available for teaching (40 minutes per hour class) and students' discipline problems, they choose to teach topics superficially. Another 25% considered most of their classes were based on teaching reading and writing. So, classes are not being communicative as there is a lack of practice of the other two skills.

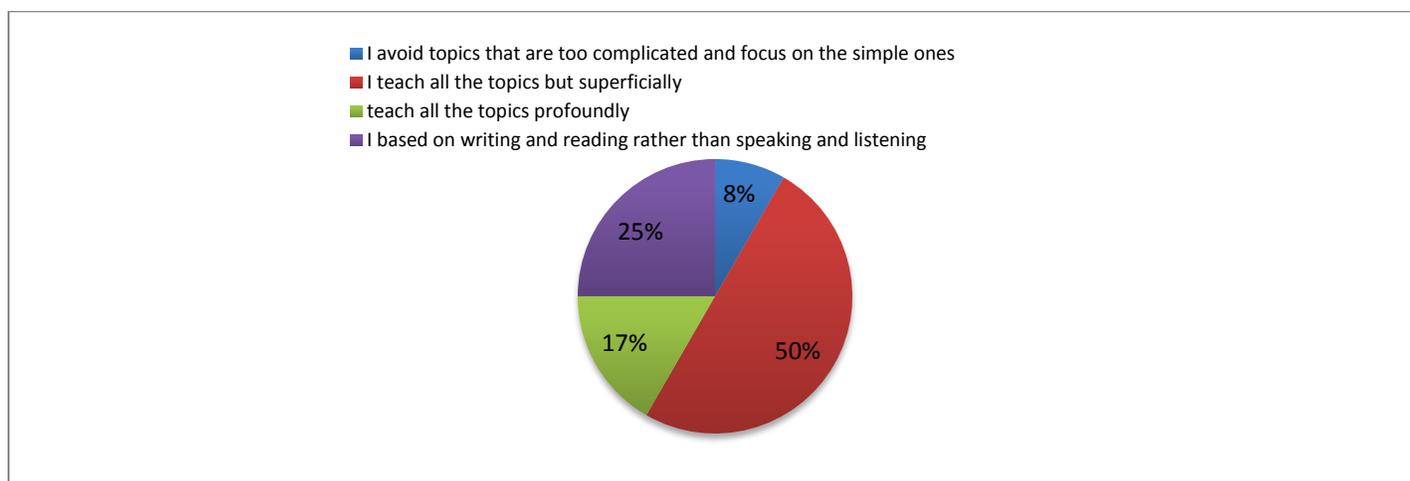


Figure 4. Topic management in large classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

When analyzing the achievement of goals in large classes, as represented in figure 5, 54% of teachers manifested that in large classes they never finish a unit on time, and 20% of them expressed it is really difficult to achieve the objectives in each class. This means that large classes are primarily affecting the amount of content teachers can provide to students and therefore, teachers' performance in each class.

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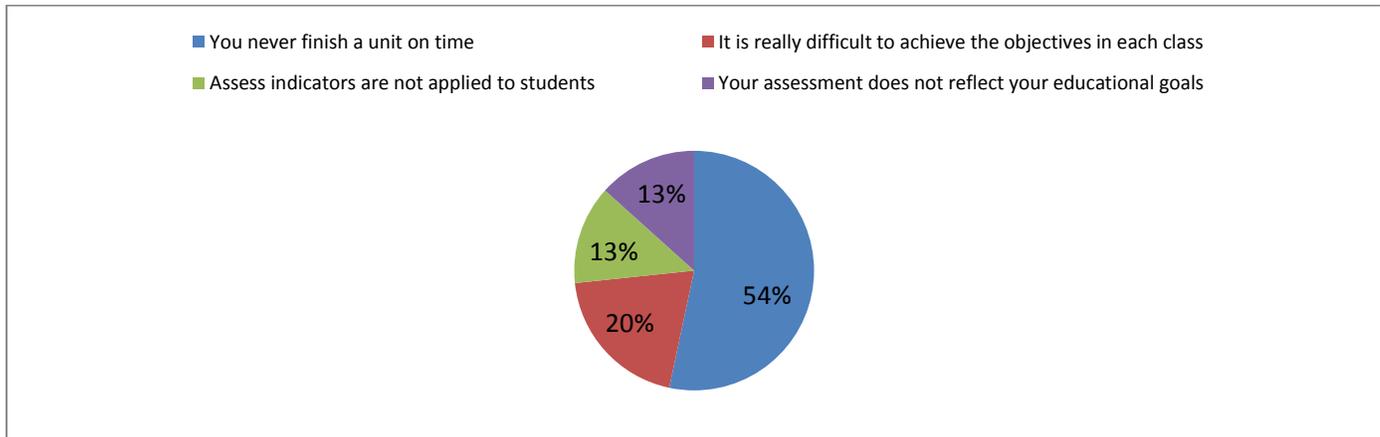


Figure 5. Achievement of educational goals in large classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

In accordance with techniques teachers prefer to use in large classes, the results revealed, as shown in figure 6, that 50% of teachers prefer to use pair-work as a technique to work in classes, while 31% choose group-work. This means that when classes are as large as 35 students, teachers like to use more pair-work activities than group work ones. Another 13% chooses solo work and 6% lectures. No teacher considered debates were good for large classes.

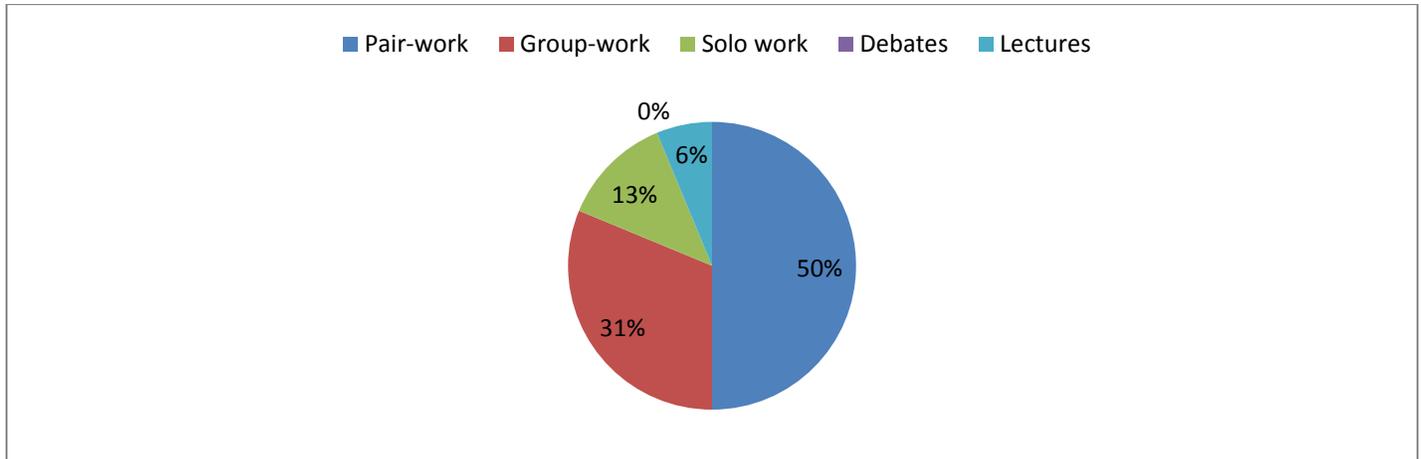


Figure 6. Techniques teachers prefer to use in large classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

In relation to teaching instructions in large classes, it can be seen in figure 7 that 34% of teachers make their own instructions when they are in large classes. Then, 33% of participants expressed they say the instructions in English and explain them in Spanish. On the other hand, 22% of teachers say the instructions in Spanish and explain them in Spanish. This means that teachers are using the first language as a way of explaining students

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what they have to do, without wasting too much time and having misunderstandings. Doing this, teachers decrease the use of the foreign language in class.

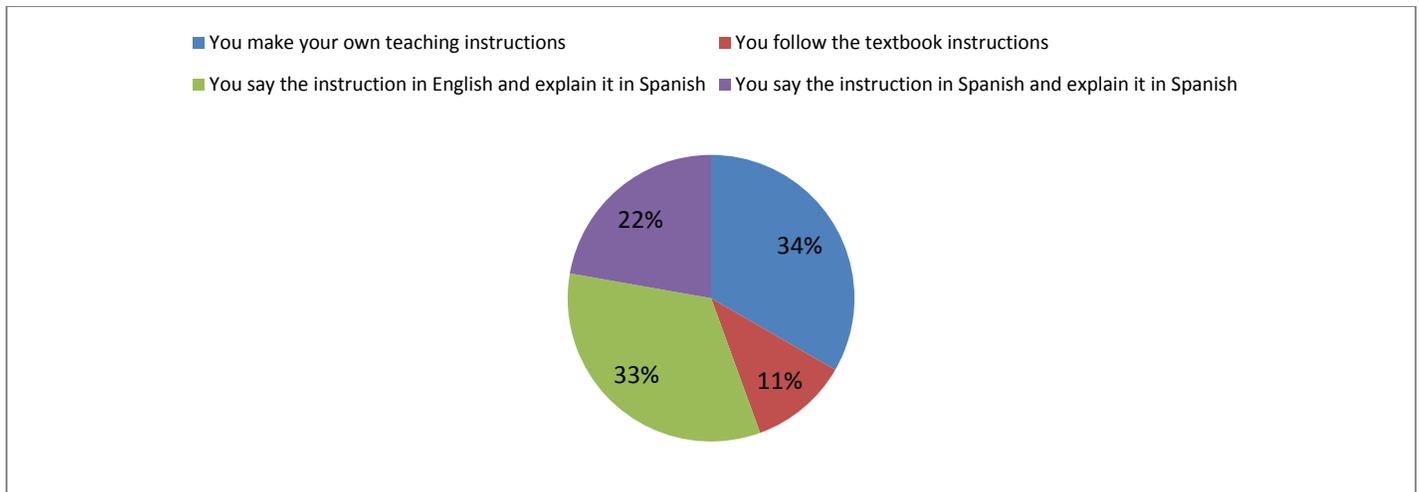


Figure 7. Teaching instructions in large classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

When analyzing the management of discipline in large classes, as is illustrated in figure 8, surprisingly 80% of the surveyed teachers do not think their classes are affected by a large number of students, while 20% expressed that they cannot control students' discipline and another 20% that it is difficult to keep students at task.

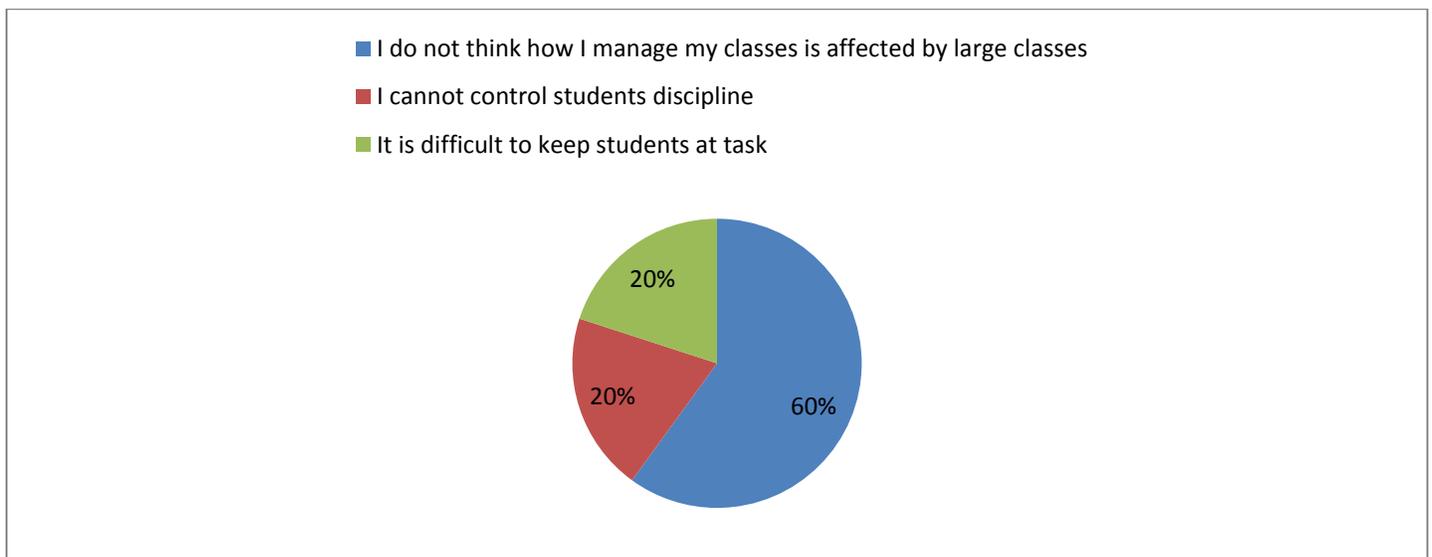


Figure 8. Discipline management in large classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

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Concerning the resources teachers use for teaching in large classes, as can be observed in figure 9, all teachers have a classroom, a blackboard, markers and books available for teaching. However, classrooms do not have appropriate lightning and are dirty most of the time. Also, not all blackboards are in good shape and teachers themselves have to buy their own markers and print their material. Besides, there is no technology available to practice listening, just the teacher’s voice, which is of course not enough. Teachers do not count with extra help to deal with students.

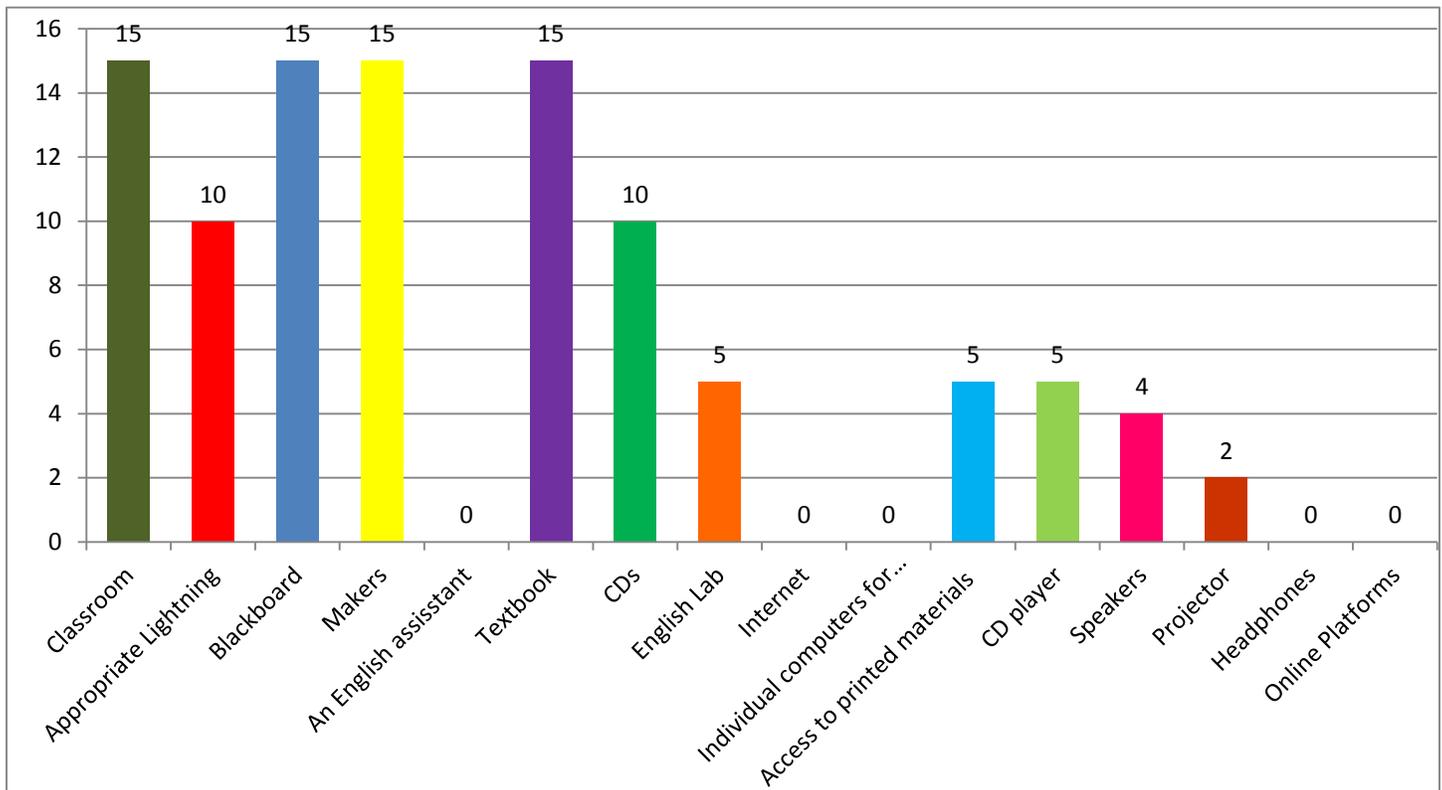


Figure 9. Resources used for teaching in large classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

Dealing with general aspects of large classes influencing English classes, as shown in figure 10, it was revealed that 29% of teachers believe their classes are negatively influenced by large classes because students do not have the opportunity to participate orally, 22% considered most of students do not pay attention and 14% believe activities are difficult to complete and to adapt.

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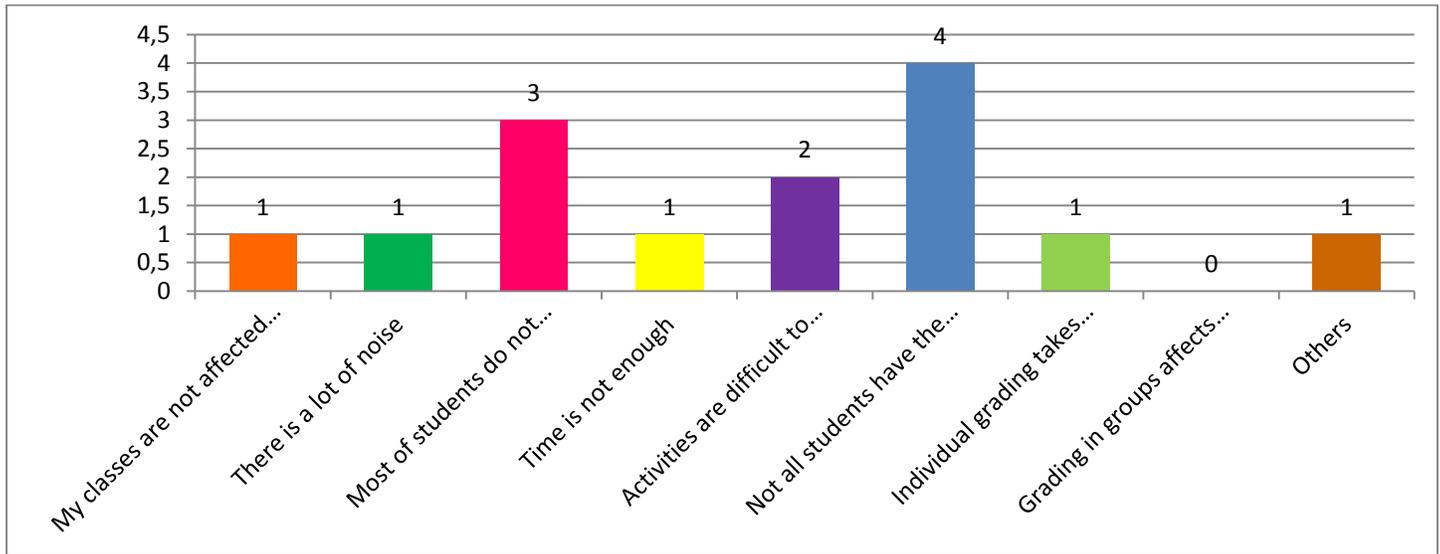


Figure 10. General aspects of large classes influencing English classes
Source: survey applied to teachers

Discussion

English teachers usually consider a class to be large if it has 35 or more students. Therefore, the number established by the government, which is 35, should be lower as English classes are already problematic at this point. These results differ from those of Locastro (1989) and Hess (2001). The first one suggested English large classes have above 38-39 students, while the second considered them to have 30 or more. Even when participants had a variety of class sizes, between 20 and 40 students, 7% reported having large classes of 25 students and 27% believed their classes were large when they were of 40 students. These findings follow Ur's definition of large class size because it is teachers' perception towards a class what makes it large, not numerical determinations (Ur cited by Quiang & Ning (2011)). It is important to regard that teachers' perception is a very subjective thing and varies considerably from one teacher to another following the different contexts in which they teach.

One factor that affects the teaching context is the resources the teacher has available for each class. Teachers who believed a class of 25 was large had the same resources as those who said 40. This is relevant because the same teacher would have different class sizes of 20, 30 and 40 and the same amount of resources to teach in each of them. The only materials they would have were books, markers and a blackboard and of course, they are not enough to teach a foreign language. For Bahanshal (2013) it is the insufficient number of resources

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what creates problems as teachers do not have what they need to make the teaching-learning process easier. That would explain why a class of 25 would be as large as a class of 40 for some teachers.

Another factor is class time. Teachers in classes with over 35 evidenced not just to have less interaction with students but also to use less effectively their class time, it means that teachers who teach in large classes spend more time in non-academic activities such as managing the class and controlling students' behavior.

Conclusions

English teaching effectiveness in Esmeraldas decreases in large classes as teachers lack the appropriate knowledge to deal with this kind of classes and the suitable conditions to teach in them.

English teachers have a general understanding of what a large class is and feel unsatisfied teaching in them. They also believe 35 and more students are difficult to work with in a lesson.

When teaching in large classes, teachers deal with topics superficially. However, they are not usually thorough in each lesson and therefore do not finish didactic units on time. Besides, they like explaining contents in Spanish as they save time trying to make students understand what they are trying to say and subsequently use less English in classes. They prefer also using pair-work as it ensures all students are at task and work equally. Finally, they do not think management problems are up to large number of students but students' attitude towards learning the language.

There is a huge lack of resources to improve the English teaching effectiveness in Esmeraldas. Besides, many facilities are in bad shape and do not offer the appropriate environment to teach. Finally, the time available for teaching is not enough.

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