

Rosabel Roig-Vila (Ed.)

La docencia en la Enseñanza Superior

Nuevas
aportaciones
desde la
investigación
e innovación
educativas

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Octaedro 
Editorial

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40. Teaching research over several academic years in High Academic Performance groups IV

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ABSTRACT

The Valencian Community has implemented English Medium Instruction (EMI) to promote teaching and learning in English since this is the main language in science. EMI is implemented in the High Academic Performance (ARA, Spanish acronym) groups in some degrees within the University of Alicante. The objective of this study is to know if students and professors would like to participate in ARA groups if they were created in degrees other than those where they are already established, as well as the level of satisfaction of both students and professors in these groups. To carry out the study, surveys were given to students and professors from the Faculty of Science of the University of Alicante. Results show that more than half of non-ARA students would be interested in the implementation of such a group in their degree, particularly those in Chemistry. Both professors and students agree that the knowledge acquired by ARA students does not differ significantly to that of non-ARA students, and both collectives agree in that belonging to an ARA group will not guarantee a better academic performance. Despite this, both students and professors agree that being part of an ARA group could benefit them professionally and academically due to a more proficient use of English and the reduced number of students in practical and theoretical lectures. Our study illustrates the demand from professors and students to establish teaching groups in English in all science degrees, and the need for long term studies to evaluate their success.

KEY WORDS: ARA Groups, university teaching and learning, English, Faculty of Sciences, University of Alicante.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language making considerable impacts on our society, and it is the official language in science. Accordingly, the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is increasingly becoming more relevant in different educative institutions, such as universities. However, there is no consensus on the most appropriate way to integrate EMI into studies, making this difficult because there are not enough trained professors, in some cases. (Nunan, 2003). To solve these issues, the European Union has developed and implemented an educational program (The Bologna process) in which the internationalization of studies is promoted, making teaching in a common language essential for education (Fejes, 2006; Díez Gutiérrez, 2009). As a result, some countries have started to promote EMI to provide students with greater possibilities for their professional future.

As an example of the promotion of EMI, the Valencian Community has implemented the High Academic Performance (ARA, Spanish acronym) groups in universities to promote teaching and learning in English. These groups aim to reinforce the potential of the most outstanding students. ARA group lessons are characterized for using EMI. Furthermore, ARA groups present a small number of students and they have advantages in ERASMUS programs, access to research grants and the

European Diploma Supplement. Considering the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Alicante, the participation in an ARA group is only possible in the Biology degree, whereas degrees of Physics, Mathematics, Chemistry, Marine Science or Geology do not have this possibility.

The main objective of this study is to assess the willingness of students and professors to participate in ARA groups if they were created in other degrees apart from Biology, as well as, the level of satisfaction of both students and professors in these groups. Furthermore, this study aims to assess whether there is a temporary trend in preferences regarding choosing the ARA group over the last four years. The hypothesis of this study is that students who do not have an ARA group in their degree are willing to demand the implementation of the ARA group in their corresponding degree.

2. METHODS

2.1. Description of context and participants

Professors and students of different science degrees of the Faculty of Science of the University of Alicante (Marine Science, Biology, Mathematics, Geology, Chemistry and Others) were surveyed over the last four academic years about the ARA groups of the Faculty of Science, corresponding to Biology degree. Five different questionnaires were developed, each one asking different questions (see annex):

- Questionnaire for Biology students in an ARA group (Annex 6.1 ARA group).
- Questionnaire for Biology students undertaking a degree with an ARA group, but not attending it (Annex 6.2. non-ARA Biology group).
- Questionnaire for students undertaking a degree without an ARA group (Annex 6.3 non-ARA groups): Marine Science, Mathematics, Geology, Chemistry and Others.
- Questionnaire for Biology professors teaching in an ARA group (Annex 6.4. ARA groups professors).
- Questionnaire for professors not teaching in an ARA group (Annex 6.5. non-ARA groups professors): Biology, Marine Science, Mathematics, Geology, Chemistry and Others.

2.2. Tools

Virtual surveys were carried out using Google Forms. Their dissemination was made through email, WhatsApp and advertisements on the virtual campus of the University of Alicante to students and professors of the Faculty of Science of the University of Alicante, obtaining 221 responses.

2.3. Data analysis

The trend of the response variables along the studied academic years was analyzed by fitting the data to a first-order polynomial regression model. Previously, the parametric assumptions of the regressions were checked. Normality was checked by means of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, while homoscedasticity was visually checked by qqplot. For the rest of the data that had discrete levels with not replication a descriptive statistic through graph plotting was performed. The statistical environment R (R Core Team, 2019) and Microsoft Excel were used for regressions models and graph plotting, respectively.

3. RESULTS

The participation in the surveys is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the survey’s participants. Note: For analysis, Physics, Mathematics, Geology and Other science degrees were grouped under “Other science degrees” with a total of 30 responses as they were not enough responses.

	Gender			Students					Faculty	
	Man	Woman	Not said	Biology (ARA)	Biology (non-ARA)	Marine Science	Chemistry	Other science degrees	ARA	Non-ARA
Number	75	121	25	25	77	25	24	30	19	21
Percentage	33.9%	54.7%	11.4%	13.8%	42.5%	13.8%	13.3%	16.6%	47.5%	52.5%
Total		221				181				40

3.1. Students’ awareness of the existence of ARA groups

The percentage of students’ awareness about the existence of ARA groups in Biology has remained constant over the last four academic years (Figure 1). This non-significant pattern was consistent for students in Marine Science (p-value = 0.19), non-ARA Biology students (p-value = 0.76) and students from other Science degrees (p-value = 0.26). Roughly, between 50-80% of the students were aware of the existence of these groups.

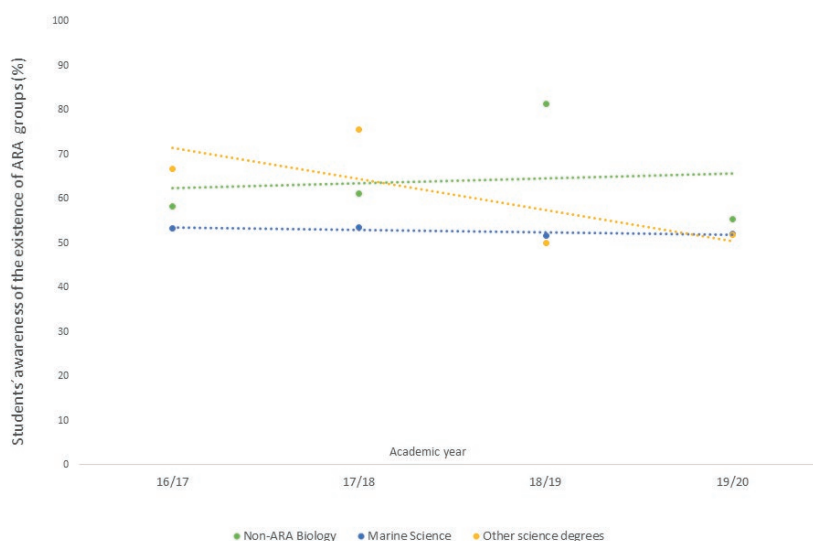


Figure 1. Percentage of students’ awareness of the existence of ARA groups across the last four academic years. Note: Other science grades include Geology and Mathematics for the academic years 16/17, 17/18 and 18/19, and Chemistry, Geology and Mathematics for the academic year 19/20. Non-ARA Biology group (p-value= 0.76; R²=0.06); Marine Science (p-value= 0.19; R²=0.65); Other science degrees (p-value= 0.26; R²=0.55). As an exception, Chemistry degree responses were included in “Other science degrees” as there was no previous analysis for that degree.

Regarding the question of whether they were aware of the existence of ARA groups before starting their degree, 51.9% of students who do not belong to an ARA group did know about their existence. From those students who had the option to access an ARA group during their degree but did not choose it, 58.4% knew of its existence. Finally, 60% of students who belong to an ARA group knew of it before starting the degree (Figure 2).

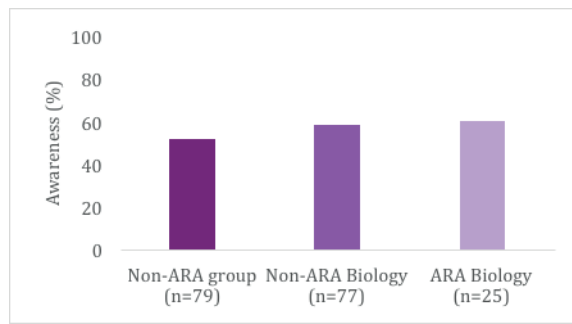


Figure 2. Percentage of students' awareness of the existence of ARA groups before starting the degree. Note: "n" stands for the number of responses.

3.2. Non-ARA students' demand for the creation of an ARA group in their degree

Students who currently have no option to attend an ARA group have demonstrated their willingness in being part of this group if it was implemented in their corresponding grades (Figure 3). It should be noted that Chemistry students are more interested than Marine Science students (83.3% versus 52%, respectively).

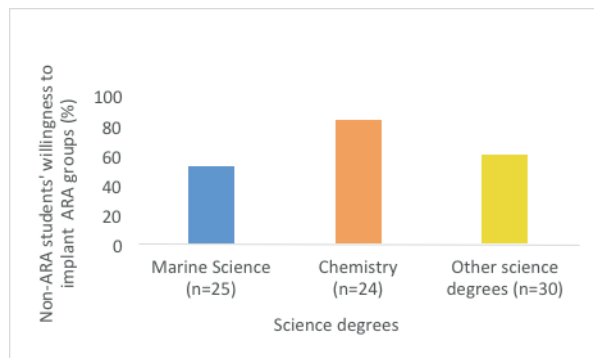


Figure 3. Percentage of students' willingness of the implantation of ARA groups in their corresponding degree. Note: "n" stands for the number of responses.

3.3. ARA professors' and students' satisfaction level

As for the degree of satisfaction related to the ARA group, the students and professors gave an average mark of 7.3 and 6.2, respectively (Figure 4).

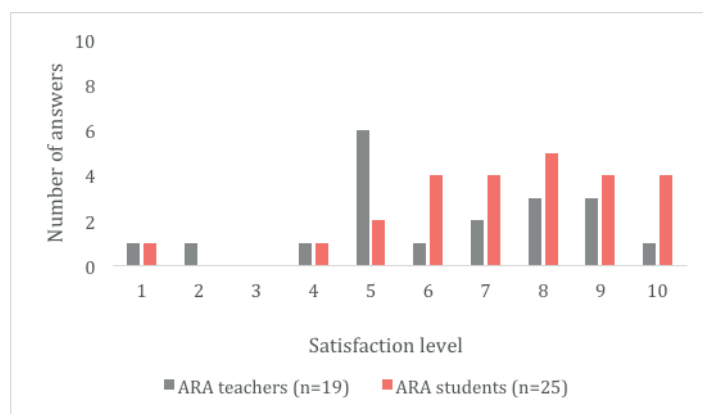


Figure 4. Frequency distribution of answers regarding the level of satisfaction of professor (grey) and students (pink) in 2020. Note: "n" stands for the number of responses.

Comparing these results with those obtained in previous years, professors' satisfaction level has slightly decreased from 7.5 in 2017 to 6.2 in 2020, although this trend was not significant (p -value = 0.19; Figure 5B). Students' opinion did not show a significant trend over the years with an average mark of 6.5 in 2017, 6.8 in 2018, 8.4 in 2019 and 7.3 in 2020 (p -value = 0.37; Figure 5A).

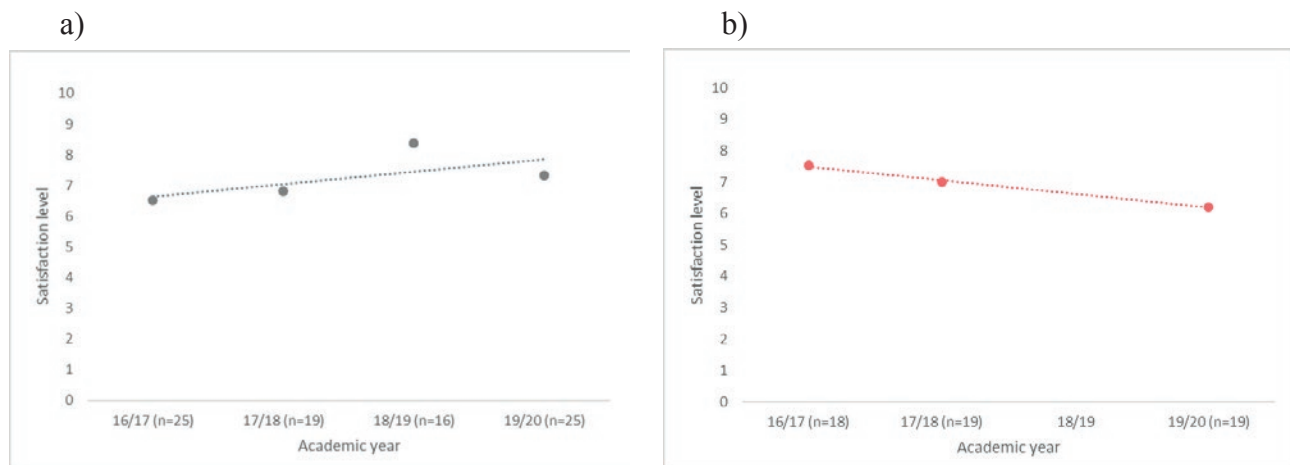


Figure 5. Satisfaction level with the ARA methodology through the years of a) students (p -value= 0.37; $R^2=0.40$) and b) professors (p -value= 0.19; $R^2=0.91$). “n” stands for the number of responses. Note: the dashed line in graph b reflects the evolution of satisfaction from the 2017/2018 to the 2019/2020 academic year without taking into account the data for the 2017/2018 year as they are lacking.

3.4. Education level and ease to find a job in ARA groups vs non-ARA groups

While non-ARA students and non-ARA Biology students agreed that they have the same education level as ARA Biology students (60.3% and 71%, respectively), ARA Biology students differed, showing a lower percentage (23.8%) of students with the opinion that the education level is the same (Figure 6). Nevertheless, 86.9% of non-ARA students, 58.3% of non-ARA Biology students and 76.2% of ARA Biology students agreed that being part of an ARA group would benefit them in the future to find a job related to their academic degree (Figure 6).

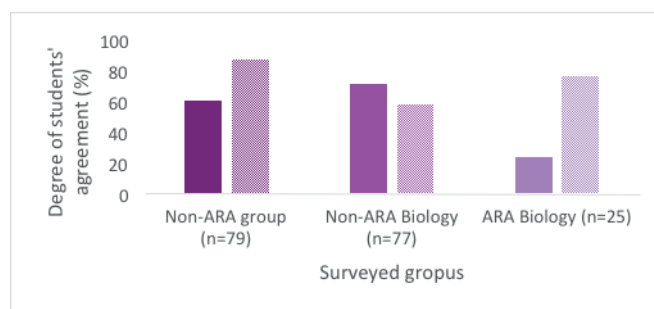


Figure 6. Percentage of students of different surveyed science groups who agree that being part of an ARA group provides the same academic formation (solid colour) and would benefit them in finding a job (light colour). Note: “n” stands for the number of responses.

3.5. English as the working language

Regarding the EMI, 96% of the students belonging to an ARA group would be willing to have native professors despite they never had them.

As for the professors who lecture in an ARA group, many of them would prefer to use Spanish as the medium for instruction (61.1%), while 33.3% were indifferent to giving lectures either in English or Spanish. Only 5.6% of professors preferred teaching in English.

Regarding the level of English of the students, 56% of the students who belong to an ARA group had a B2 level of English, 32% have the C1 certification, while only a 4% of them had the C2 level (Figure 7A).

On the other hand, most of the students who do not belong to an ARA group had a basic/intermediate level of English (30.8% for B1 and 24.4% for B2), 19% have reached the C1 qualification though only 1.9% had the highest level. Besides their certifications, out of the 156 students who do not belong to an ARA group, 53.9% felt that their English level is good enough to attend an ARA group.

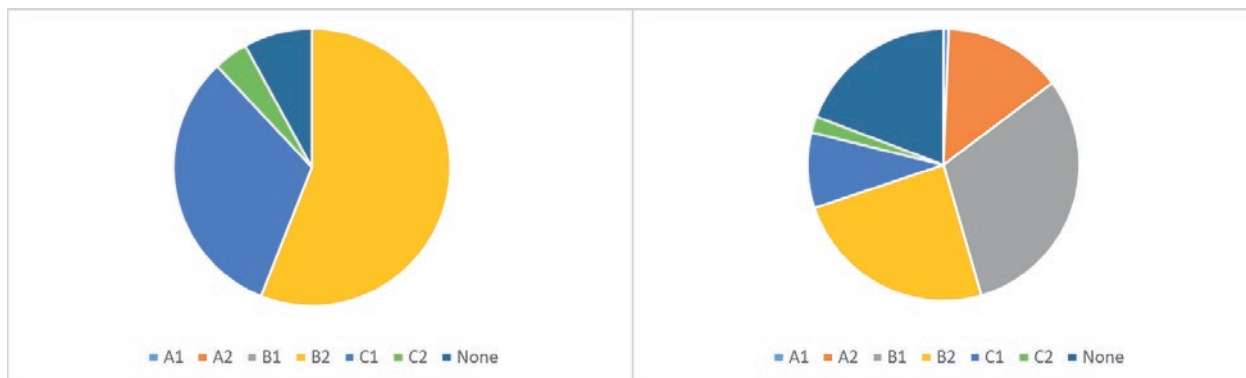


Figure 7. English level of students: a) Belonging to an ARA group (n=25); b) Not belonging to an ARA group (n=156). “n” stands for the number of responses.

3.6. Would another name for ARA groups attract more students?

More than half of the surveyed students (63.5%) thought that the name of the ARA group should be modified (Figure 8).

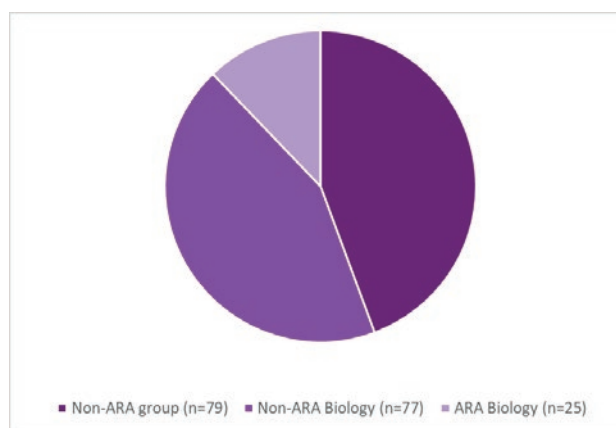


Figure 8. Students who think the ARA groups should be called differently. “n” stands for the number of responses.

With regard to the percentage of students who think that the group should be called something else, a large percentage (61.8%) suggested a name indicating that it is a reduced group in which English is the medium of instruction, while 47.1% thought that it should simply be indicated that EMI is used, and 3.9% thought that it should only be indicated that it is a reduced group (Figure 9).

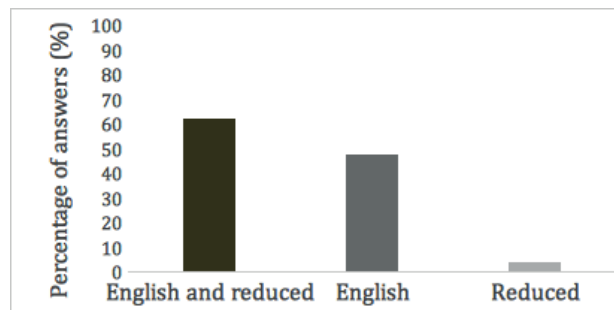


Figure 9. Words that all students think should be included in the ARA group names.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The awareness of students on non-ARA Biology groups about the ARA group has decreased by 26% since last year, although this trend reflects more a year to year oscillation rather than a significant temporal trend. In the case of Marine Sciences and other science degrees it has remained relatively constant, at ca. 50-60% of students being aware of the existence of those groups. Considering that there are still 20-50% of students unaware of the existence of ARA groups when they begin their University studies, and that 63.5% of students think that the group should be called different, the data suggests that a higher effort should be made to inform about the existence of ARA groups and explaining its characteristics. This could be done by increasing the number of informative talks and informing students through a diverse array of media (e.g., social networks or universities' website) (Huguet-Sánchez *et al.*, 2019).

The level of satisfaction from students and, particularly, professors belonging to the ARA Biology group has slightly decreased since last year, although this temporal trend is not significant. These trends suggest that some changes could be applied according to the needs aiming to solve any possible problem and more detailed questionnaires regarding the reasons of this lower satisfaction levels are necessary. So far, it is thought decline in the level of satisfaction could be derived from expectations caused by the “high performance” definition, when these groups characteristics are the usage of English and the reduced size of the groups, not necessarily a higher academic performance of students within ARA groups.

The language in which lectures are taught does not seem to match the educational level for students in non-ARA groups, while students of an ARA group think otherwise. Nevertheless, most students think that being part of an ARA group would make it easy for them to find a job related to their degree in the future, especially non-ARA students. This result could be explained by the fact that English is considered as an important language for all science students. The positive trend over the years of this thinking supports the idea that the implementation of an ARA group in the rest of the science degrees will be supported by the students. However, to do that implementation some rules should change because of nowadays one of the requirements of the University of Alicante to create an ARA group is a “minimum of 100 students in the first year of Title” and some degrees such as Marine Sciences does not meet that requirement (Universidad de Alicante, 2019). Adapting the implementation rules to students' demands related to their willingness to obtain a more complete formation should be a priority to adapt universities to a changing and a globalized education (Rizvi, 2000).

In relation to this, the level of accreditation of the students who do not belong to an ARA group is notably lower than the students who belong to an ARA group, most of them having a B1 certificate.

Despite more than half of these students felt that their English level is good enough to attend an ARA group, strategies for increasing the level of English should be promoted if new ARA groups are expected to be created.

Regarding the professors of the ARA group, a large part of them prefer to give the classes in Spanish, so courses to increase their proficiency in English as well as internships to promote lectures by international professors such as with the current Erasmus programme for professors should be promoted. Languages require continuous training, thus continuous professor training should be promoted by the universities following the European Commission guidelines (Massa, 2015). This would both satisfy the students' demand for lectures by native speakers, keeping the communication and writing skills of the professors at an optimum level, and facilitate potential collaborations among universities.

As a general conclusion, despite the level of satisfaction of professors and students belonging to ARA groups has not increased over the years, both collectively, and even those students outside ARA groups, see benefits of the existence of these groups to enhance student opportunities in the job market. However, students who do not have access to an ARA group have expressed interest in implementing the group in their respective grades, especially in the case of Chemistry students. The reason why these groups have not been implemented yet might be related to a limited budget to do so, not enough students in the degree to allow splitting them into different groups, or a reduced number of professors with the qualification required to teach in these groups. A better and more proactive work should be done in order to increase the awareness of students regarding the existence of these groups early on in their university studies and to promote mobility of native English speakers as professors for these groups. The reasons for not implementing these groups in other degrees, and those behind the seemingly negative trends in the perception of those who have this group, deserve further investigation.

English is a key element in facilitating greater international mobility of students and promoting their integration into the labour market. Therefore, the creation and implementation of groups and subjects in English in university degrees is increasingly common in Spanish universities (Halbach *et al.*, 2013). Still, the rate of creation of these groups may be slower than demanded. Despite economic and other type of restraints, the creation of groups with EMI should be a priority for the Spanish universities to promote the formation of complete and competitive students in current global society.

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6. ANNEX

6.1. ARA group students survey

- Which degree are you studying?
- About your secondary education: you received most lessons in English, you received some lessons in English or you did not receive any lesson in English (as exception of the lesson English)
- Which course are you studying?
- My gender is best represented by the term: female, male or not saying.
- How old are you? (Introduce just numbers)
- Did you know about the existence of ARA groups before starting the degree?
- Do you know the advantages of studying in an ARA group?
- How did you know about the existence of ARA groups?
- Do you think your English level has increased with the bilingual education?
- Do you have any official English degree? At what level is equivalent?
- Rate from 0 to 10 the importance that you think English has in your title, where 0 is nothing and 10 is a lot.
- Would you say that there are professors at the UA with specific competences to teach in English?
- Do you think you have a best academic training compared with those students who are not in an ARA group?
- Would you say that, in general, the academic level required in ARA groups is higher than in non-ARA groups?
- Have you ever had native professors in the degree? If yes, would you like to study more subjects with native professors? If not, would you like to have native professors?
- Do you consider you have the same level of knowledge of the subjects of your degree as the students who do not belong to an ARA group?
- Has the ARA group met your expectations?
- Rate from 0 to 10 your satisfaction level with the ARA group, where 0 is not at all satisfied and 10 is totally satisfied.
- Would you study in an ARA group if it lacked all the advantages it has?

- Do you think it would be easier for you to find a job according to your training after being part of an ARA group?
- Do you think that the number of students of ARA groups would increase if it were named differently? If your answer was yes, which of the following would you suggest for the group name?: A name indicating that it is a reduced group, a name indicating that it is a small group or a name that indicates both?
- Did you answer this survey last year?
- Do you have any suggestion or proposal to make regarding ARA groups?

6.2. Non-ARA Biology group students survey

- Which degree are you studying?
- About your secondary education: you received most lessons in English, you received some lessons in English or you did not receive any lesson in English (as exception of the lesson English)
- Which course are you studying?
- My gender is best represented by the term: female, male or not saying.
- How old are you? (Introduce just numbers)
- Did you know about the existence of ARA groups before starting the degree?
- Do you know the advantages of studying in an ARA group?
- Would you be interested in studying in an ARA group if you had the opportunity?
- Do you think you have the appropriate English level to join an ARA group?
- Please, mention the main reasons why you decided not to join an ARA group
- Do you think that the bilingual education that ARA students have received gives them better academic training than yours?
- Do you have any official English degree? At what level is equivalent?
- Rate from 0 to 10 the importance that you think English has in your title, where 0 is nothing and 10 is a lot.
- Would you say that there are professors at the UA with specific competences to teach in English?
- Do you think it would be easier for you to find a job according to your training after being part of an ARA group?
- Do you think that the number of students of ARA groups would increase if it were named differently? If your answer was yes, which of the following would you suggest for the group name?: A name indicating that it is a reduced group, a name indicating that it is a small group or a name that indicates both?
- Did you answer this survey last year?
- Do you have any suggestion or proposal to make regarding ARA groups?

6.3. Non-ARA groups students survey

- Which degree are you studying?
- About your secondary education: you received most lessons in English, you received some lessons in English or you did not receive any lesson in English (as exception of the lesson English)
- Which course are you studying?
- My gender is best represented by the term: female, male or not saying.
- How old are you? (Introduce just numbers)
- Did you know about the existence of ARA groups before starting the degree?

- Do you know the advantages of studying in an ARA group?
- Would you be interested in studying in an ARA group if you had the opportunity?
- Do you think you have the appropriate English level to join an ARA group?
- Do you consider that you are proportioned the same educational level that those students in an ARA group?
- Do you know someone who is joining an ARA group?
- Do you think that the bilingual education that ARA students have received gives them better academic training than yours?
- Do you agree with the curricular advantages of ARA groups?
- Rate from 0 to 10 the importance that you think English has in your title, where 0 is nothing and 10 is a lot.
- Would you say that there are professors at the UA with specific competences to teach in English?
- Do you have any official English degree? At what level is equivalent?
- Do you think it would be easier for you to find a job according to your training after being part of an ARA group?
- Do you think that the number of students of ARA groups would increase if it were named differently? If your answer was yes, which of the following would you suggest for the group name?: A name indicating that it is a reduced group, a name indicating that it is a small group or a name that indicates both?
- Did you answer this survey last year?
- Do you have any suggestion or proposal to make regarding ARA groups?

6.4. ARA groups professors survey

- My gender is best represented by the term: female, male or not saying.
- Do you think that the English level of the students accords to that level required by higher studies levels?
- Do you consider that English teaching provides any benefit to ARA professors?
- Do you think that ARA students show a greater predisposition to learning compared to non-ARA students?
- Do you think that classes attendance in ARA groups is higher than in non-ARA groups?
- Do you consider that, apart from the language classes are given, ARA groups have a higher academic level?
- Do you think that one of the biggest advantages of ARA groups is the reduce number of students per class compared to non-ARA groups?
- What level of (official) English accreditation do you have?
- How many years ago did you get your English accreditation?
- Do you feel equally comfortable teaching in both English and Spanish?
- Do you think that the use of English as the work language in teaching can slow the dynamics of the classes?
- Rate from 0 to 10 your satisfaction level with the ARA group, where 0 is not at all satisfied and 10 is totally satisfied.
- If you had to choose between teaching in ARA groups or in non-ARA groups, which one would you choose?
- Do you think teaching in ARA groups would be advantageous for your professional projection?

- Did you answer this survey last year?
- Do you have any suggestion or proposal to make regarding ARA groups?

6.5. Non-ARA groups professors survey

- My gender is best represented by the term: female, male or not saying.
- Do you know what an AR group consists on?
- Do you know the advantages and benefits teaching in an ARA group provides?
- Do you think that one of the biggest advantages of ARA groups is the reduce number of students per class compared to non-ARA groups?
- What level of (official) English accreditation do you have?
- How many years ago did you get your English accreditation?
- If you had to choose between teaching in ARA groups or in non-ARA groups, which one would you choose?
- Do you think that the use of English as the work language in teaching can slow the dynamics of the classes?
- Do you think it would be appropriate for all degrees to have the opportunity to join an ARA group?
- Do you think teaching in ARA groups would be advantageous for your professional projection?
- Did you answer this survey last year?
- Do you have any suggestion or proposal to make regarding ARA groups?