

Master's Dissertation/  
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HOW TO MANAGE MIXED-ABILITY  
CLASSES IN A CLIL ENVIRONMENT:  
FACTORS, METHODOLOGICAL  
STRATEGIES, AND ASSESSMENT.  
DIDACTIC APPLICATION

**Student: Jambrina Pérez, María**

Supervisor: Dr. Ráez Padilla, Juan  
Department: English Philology

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Each student is unique. Each student has its own potential and characteristics, in other words, all classes are mixed-ability to some degree and it is only by becoming aware of students' needs, strengths and capabilities that we can identify the right tools, strategies and methods to work with.

Successful mixed-ability teaching is, therefore, about enabling students' own potential to be discovered and realized. Hence teachers have a crucial role to play in mixed-ability classes.

Careful preparation of the methodology, and selection and differentiation activities can make language and content more accessible to learners. The way we plan classes and the decisions we take during lessons can go a long way to make sure that different students in a mixed-ability group are kept involved and motivated. We also need to be aware of our words and actions, remembering that effective communication means talking to different students in different ways. The way we speak to individual students and the feedback we give, can have a huge impact on their attitude to learning, and this is another important aspect of successful mixed-ability teaching.

The most important goal for a teacher is to help students become the best that they can be. For that we need an individualized approach focused on the students' needs, complete with personalized outcomes that differ from student to student.

Based on this view, the present master's dissertation aims to study how to manage mixed-ability groups in the CLIL environment for this purpose, the topic will be divided into various sections.

- In the first part we will consider why classes are mixed ability, in order to do so we need to, first, have a look at a theoretical background about definitions of mixed-ability or heterogeneous classes, to, then, identify the main variables involved in a mixed-ability class.
- Managing the classroom using effective strategies is an important feature of successful mixed-ability teaching, therefore in the following section we will focus on methodological aspect to make the most of our students offering

approaches and ideas that might suggest ways in which students can be stimulated to learn in our mixed-ability groups.

- Assessment can, and should, be an integral part of what teachers do so in the next point, we will focus on three main kinds of assessments and their advantages in a mixed-ability learning context.
- Finally, we will discuss the ways in which the differences between learners can add variety and value to our lesson instead of just challenges for the teacher promoting collaborative and cooperative project that energizes and engages our students.

## **2. WHY CLASSES ARE MIXED ABILITY**

### **2.1. Definitions**

First of all, it is necessary to differentiate between mixed-ability classes and mixed-ability teaching.

It is highly common to have a mixed-ability group and teachers may not be using mixed-ability teaching strategies or methods appropriately. So first of all, we need to know what some authors consider a mixed-ability group could be.

Initially Ur (1988) defined the concept of ‘mixed ability’ as a synonym of ‘heterogeneous classes’ quoting her “*classes made up of students of different level of proficiency*” (Ur, 1988:13). However, Ur (1991) advocated in the early 90s, that these two terms were misleading because “*no two learners are really alike hence she considered that homogeneous classes do not actually exist*” (Ur, 1991: 3). This author reinvented her own previous definition pointing out that “*all classes are made up of learners who differ in many different ways*” (Ur, 1991: 3).

As we have seen, in 1991 Penny Ur showed her inclination to use the term heterogeneous instead of mixed-ability due to a clear reason. The term mixed-ability denotes that the main difference between all the members of a class is just their language-learning ability while the term heterogeneous refers to plenty of other differences that must be taken into account within the school context; such as “*preferred learning style, personality, interests and cultural background*” (Ur, 1991: 5).

In relation to mixed-ability classroom, another author, Tomlinson (2001) noted that

Kids of the same age aren't all alike when it comes to learning, any more than they are alike in terms of hobbies, personalities, or likes and dislikes". In this line, "at its most basic level, differentiating instruction means "shaking up" what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking the information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn (Tomlinson, 2001: 79).

While Essinki (2009) specified that *"the bottom line in any of our teaching contexts is that whilst thinking of our students as a group for practical purposes, we also have to recognise that the group is made up of individuals who will, naturally have different strengths and weaknesses for a range of reasons"* (Essinki, 2009: 12)

If we look for an accurate definition of mixed-ability in the English Collins Dictionary we can find the following:

A mixed ability class or teaching system is one in which pupils are taught together in the same class, even though their abilities are different. Mixed ability teaching is a fact of not only language classes but of all courses. Since no two students can be the same in terms of language background, learning speed, learning ability and motivation. (English Collins Dictionary)

Finally, Ansari (2013) defined a mixed-ability class as *"comprising of not only learners with various capacities but also those that have a broad range of preferences and learning styles"* (Ansari, 2013: 6) whereas Valentic (2005) considered that mixed-ability classes is a term that refers to a *"variation of students in specific areas, these are grammatical knowledge, size of vocabulary, receptive and productive skills and fluency and accuracy"* (Valentic 2005: 15).

As we have seen so far, there is something that is constantly repeated in the previous definitions which is that in mixed-ability classes learners vary in strengths and weakness, the term mixed-ability does not consist of just a range of abilities, it is something else, it is related to learning styles, preferences, and range of levels in their learning and achievement, diverse approaches to learning and displaying their work. Yet

in a real sense, all classes have students with a mixture of different abilities, a broad range of levels in their achievements and language levels amongst other factors.

## **2.2. Identifying variables in a mixed-ability class**

Learning contents in another language involves a challenge for our students. It is a challenge not only to their cognitive abilities, but to their self-esteem and their social skills too. It is, in the Rebecca Oxford's words, "*a courageous process*" (Oxford 2013: 105). To wit, a teacher's job is not only to teach the language, it is also about helping learners to engage with it.

Therefore, it is essential for the teacher to truly know the particular group of students in the classroom. We should know how our learners feel, what they need and what helps them to be successful, since knowing the individual differences in learners will maximize our organizational measures.

Indeed Ellis (2004) sustained that in order to know what kind of language to teach and how we teach it, we need to know something about the students we will be working with. He pointed out that "*by exploring the variables within and between learners in a mixed-ability group, teachers not only gain insights into the best ways of approaching individuals within the group, but also begin to develop a sense of the defining features of the class as a whole*" (Ellis, 2004: 526).

In this matter, this author focused his attention into four main dimensions: language aptitude and intelligence, motivation and strategies.

### **2.2.1. Language aptitude**

The first question should be what language aptitude is. Commonly, language aptitude has been defined as a special ability applied to language learning nevertheless Carroll (1981) was more specific when defining this term as "*the capability of learning a task which depends on some combination of more or less enduring characteristics of the learner*" (Carroll, 1981: 130). Years later, Ellis (2004) added something else to this

previous definition, considering that language aptitude depended on the “*special propensity for learning a second language, too*” (Ellis, 2004: 531).

Skehan (1986), on the other hand, examined the relationship between language aptitude, language acquisition and second language learning and he discerned that aptitude tests were good predictors of foreign language learning, and furthermore “*what distinguishes exceptional students from the rest is that they have unusual memories, especially for the retention of the things they hear*” (Skehan, 1986a: 189).

Sparks and Ganschow (2001) stated that the concept of language aptitude is composed of different abilities which they structure into four different groups, “*...the ability to figure out grammatical rules from a particular sample, the ability to have a good memory for new vocabulary, the ability to memorize and identify new sounds in a language and the ability to understand the function of words*” (Sparks and Ganschow, 2001: 92).

However, they clarified that, we, as teachers, must take into account that not all students tend to be successful in the four previous abilities, indeed some of them may highlight at for example, acquiring new words and other ones may be very successful “*in figuring out the function of grammatical rules*” (Sparks and Ganschow, 2001: 94).

Additionally, Kiss and Nikolow (2005) defended that language aptitude was based on four clearly differentiated assumptions which are worthy to point out:

- Aptitude is relatively stable.
- There is a clear talent for languages that it is different from general cognitive abilities.
- Language aptitude is not a pre-requisite for the acquisition of a second language but this capacity does enhance the rate and ease of learning.
- It is composed by diverse characteristics (Kiss and Nikolow 2005: 113).

Finally, there are some authors who deliberated that aptitude and intelligence are two closed concepts. Lightbown and Spada (2013) claimed that if we consider aptitude and intelligence for language learning in general, “*(...) learners with a wide variety of intellectual abilities can be successful language learners which is especially true if the*

*emphasis is on oral communication skills rather than metalinguistic knowledge*” (Lightbown and Spada 2013: 185).

In the words of Lightbown’s (2014) *“Learning quickly is the distinguish feature of aptitude”* (Lightbown, 2014: 45).

As we have seen, it is generally held that some students are better at learning languages or have more aptitude for learning a foreign language than others. So, the language aptitude can be defined as the natural ability to learn a foreign language and is believed to be a part of general intelligence. Thus, we should always start from the consideration of respecting the natural children’s learning pace.

### **2.2.2. Intelligence**

People learn in different ways, since they have different personalities, preferences and abilities. In this light, Gardner (1983) suggested that we do not possess a single intelligence otherwise individuals have until nine intelligences which are rather independent of each other and which could be educated and fostered through schooling, *“by instruction, reinforcement and encouragement”* (Gardner, 1983: 121).

Therefore, the nine intelligence groups include:

- Verbal-linguistic intelligence. This intelligence is defined by Gardner (1996) as *“sensitivity to the meaning and syntax and using the language to achieve goals”* (Gardner 1996: 32). Gardner and Moran (2006) also claimed that *“the people who are strong in verbal-linguistic intelligence usually have a good vocabulary potential which allows them to read books and to be absorbed in the books and perform well in English classes”* (Gardner and Moran 2006: 229). It is important to note that in a mixed-ability environment, we will have students whose verbal-linguistic intelligence vary that is way one of the ways we can promote equality is to demand task that do not demand linguistic brilliance, but instead they show the talents they have.
- Logical-mathematical intelligence. Gardner and Moran (2006) defined this intelligence as *“the ability to reason and recognize patterns and order”* (Gardner and Moran 2006: 229). While Mckenzie (2005) suggested that this



intelligence is *“the understanding and use of logical structures, including patterns and relationships and statements and propositions, through experimentation, quantification, conceptualization, and classification”* (Gardner and Moran, 2005: 33).

- Visual-spatial intelligence. According to Gardner (1996) this intelligence is “the ability to perceive the world accurately” (Gardner, 1996: 32). In McKenzie’s view (2005) the visual-spatial intelligence is *“the ability to learn visually and organize ideas spatially”* (McKenzie, 2005: 33). That is to say, those students with a high level of visual-spatial intelligence have the ability to use colours, shapes, graphics and space. These students would use their mental imagery in order to discern the space orientation.
- Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence refers to the ability at moving the body in a coordinated way. McKenzie (2005) maintains that *“this intelligence allows us to learn through interaction with one’s environment promoting understanding through concrete experience”* (McKenzie, 2005: 34). In relation to this intelligence, it is worth mentioning that Asher (1996) developed a method called Total Physical Response, in which children use their body and movement to acquire a second language. According to this author (1996), *“by involving physical movement in games, students will be alert and stimulated (...) so involving physical movements every now and then will guarantee their participation”* (Asher, 1996: 102).
- Musical-Rhythmic Intelligence refers to sensitivity to pitch, melody, rhythm, stress and tone. This intelligence is considered by Lazear (1999) as *“the knowing which occurs through hearing sounds, vibrational patterns, rhythm and tonal patterns, including the full range of potential sounds produced with the vocal chords”* (Lazear, 1999:13). Hence, learning a second language through songs and develop the musical-rhythmic intelligence is one of the most well-known strategies that teachers use because it helps students to improve phonetic and phonology developing the four linguistic skills through skill integration in a very enjoyable way.
- Interpersonal Intelligence: Armstrong (2009) considers this as *“the ability to notice and make distinctions among other individuals with respect to moods, temperaments, motivations, intentions and to use this information in pragmatic*

ways” (Amstrong, 2009: 25) . It is also worthy to mention that this intelligence is connected to the development of cooperation, collaboration and working with others which is essential in a mixed-ability environment.

- Intrapersonal Intelligence. Amstrong suggested that this intelligence “empowers the individuals to understand their feelings, fears, and motives and is chiefly based on the individual’s examination and knowledge of their own feelings” (Amstrong, 2009: 26). For Walker (2014b) this intelligence includes “*accurate self-knowledge*” (Walker, 2014b: 77). It is undeniable that promoting this intelligence will be crucial in a mixed-ability environment so the teacher can set up the strategies according to the individual characteristics of their learners.
- Naturalist Intelligence. Gardner proposed this eighth Intelligence in 1995 and Mckenzie (2005) asserted that this intelligence “*enables one to select subtle differences in meaning*” (Mckenzie, 2005: 35). In Armstrong’s view (2009) this intelligence could be defined as “*the capacity to recognize and classify the numerous species of flora and fauna in one’s environment and the ability to care for, tame, or interact subtly with living creatures, or with whole ecosystems*” (Amstrong, 2009: 27). Hence, some of our students in a mixed-ability class will have a higher sensibility to plants, animals, in short, to features of the world around us while other students will have this intelligence less developed. It is the teacher the one in charge of planning activities in order to promote this intelligence too.
- Existential Intelligence. Gardner suggested this ninth intelligence in 1999, and later on educational researchers such as Mckenzie (2005) advocated that “*by having such a talent which is the capacity to deal with deep questions, questions about the existence of human beings will come to mind like seeking the meaning of life, the reason of death, and our role in the world*” (Mckenzie, 2005: 36).

Finally, it was Goleman (1995) who added another intelligence “*emotional intelligence referred to the ability to emphasize, control impulse and self-motivate*” (Goleman 1995:12). However, in spite of the previous distinction of intelligences that has been set out in detail, Gardner and Moran (2006) opposed to the idea of labelling each student to a specific intelligence because in his words “*this theory should empower learners*” (Gardner and Moran, 2006: 230).

To close, it is fundamental to pinpoint that we, as teachers, should pay attention to how our students learn individually and how well each of them cope with the materials they are given, checking how each member of the class respond to particular activities and how they interact with each other in order to offer them a teaching of quality in a mixed-ability environment.

### **2.2.3. Motivation**

After having considered these first factors, we must not forget that motivation is a variable which influences foreign language learning and which plays a crucial role in mixed-ability classes. Motivated students can achieve a good working knowledge of foreign language learning regardless of their aptitude and cognitive characteristics.

In this line, Dörnyei (2001), claimed that “*motivation is an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do*”, which plays an essential role in any learning situation in terms of success or failure (Dörnyei, 2001: 1). This author identified three crucial motivational conditions which are worth mentioning, “*appropriate teacher behaviour and a good relationship with the students, a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere, and finally, a cohesive learner group with appropriate norm*” (Dörnyei, 2001: 5).

On the other hand, according to Harmer (2012) motivation is “*some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue an action*” (Harmer, 2012: 90). In this sense, we could state that motivated students usually do better than students who are not as motivated. In discussion of motivation, Jeremy Harmer made an accepted distinction between the motivation that comes from “*outside*” and from “*inside*”.

On one hand, *extrinsic motivation* is concerned with external factors, that is to say factors outside the classroom, such as the need to pass an exam the possibility of a financial reward or the hope of a future trip, with students studying for other external reasons far from just enjoying the learning process. In that sense, students will try to make minimal effort to get the maximum reward and that is why, it should be used carefully with intrinsic motivation, because if not, the second one would eventually decrease.

While intrinsic motivation is related to what takes place inside the classroom such as the physical conditions of the classroom, the methodology used or the teacher's attitude, being the most interesting motivation to be considered, with students feeling the natural need to search for challenge, studying for the sake of studying, just because they enjoy doing so, demanding a great effort for themselves and being the main goal of any motivational development. According to Oxford (2013), intrinsic motivation is described as "*passion for learning*" and a "*sense of competence while performing tasks*" (Oxford, 2013: 98).

However, our students are not always motivated and that is why we need to take into account that students' attitudes in class are influenced by a number of people and places. We could state that the most important one for these young learners might be their families, if learning languages is seen as a priority in the household, and then students are likely to reflect this attitude and to put more effort on their own learning. On the contrary, if language learning is if language learning is uninteresting to the family, then the student will need to have their own strong feelings in order to counter this.

We cannot forget that younger students have a natural curiosity, and this can affect their initial motivation. But, as we get older, previous learning experiences can have a strong impact on how motivated we are likely to be, and can have a progressive corrosive effect upon that curiosity. They believe that we can or cannot learn languages is, as Ansari suggested, "*extremely powerful and can either spur us forward or hold us back*" (Ansari, 2013: 8).

Winisewska (2013) points out that some people seem to believe that "*in the contemporary world young people are willing to learn foreign languages, specially English, and we believe they should find English classes interesting but research shows that adolescent are very often unmotivated to learn, are disaffected and disengaged*" (Winisewska 2013: 213).

Hence, this lack of motivation may have something to do with issues such as class size, the compulsory nature of learning, and the attitude of the school or university they are

studying it. It is certainly true that many young people fail to see the importance of learning another language and do not enjoy the conditions in which takes place on the way it is done but we can carry out a set of strategies, to make the learning process more attractive, for example, using materials and activities that are relevant to our students' lives and interests, using technology in the class such as smartphones or tablets to learn English in an interactive way, another key to substation motivation in the classroom is to vary activities so that we can cater different learner preferences and strategies.

Finally we could summarize this point by saying that “*the brain needs positive emotions, experiences of success, and a sense of ownership in order to be fully engaged in the learner process*” (Puchta 2014: 22).

#### **2.2.4. Learning strategies**

The next factor to be considered is the learning strategies, which could be defined as particular approaches or techniques used by students in the foreign language process, usually problem-solved oriented.

Oxford, R. (1990) notes that learning strategies are “*specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations*” (Oxford, 1990: 102). In other words, learning strategies are steps taken by the students to enhance their own learning. In this line, Senior (2006) makes references to strategies as “*the different mechanism used either consciously or not, in order to get, store, retrieve and use information*” (Senior, 2006: 143).

For Jeremy Harmer (2008) the strategies that students use to help them learn may have a significant impact on their success or lack of it. He stated “*It would make sense, therefore to show our students what good learner strategies are like and then to help them to employ them*” (Harmer, 2008: 98).

On her behalf, Griffiths (2007) found that there were discrepancies between teachers and students and their concept of learning strategies “*teachers report a strong awareness of the importance of language learning strategies*” while “*many of the*

*strategies which student report using highly frequently are regarded as important by teachers”* (Griggiths 2007: 98) Such strategies include way of approaching a reading text, or how to record vocabulary. Another author, Chen (2007) considered that reflection was a key component regarding learning strategies and therefore his students were asked to record comments about their learning progress, the use of strategies they were learning, their reflections and feeling related to the learning process, or any other comments and observations (Chen 2007: 22).

While Humphreys and Wyatt (2014) decided to keep “*interactive learning journals*” as a learning strategy, and according to these teachers “*those students who used these journals effectively, appeared to demonstrate an ability to manage themselves and plan their learning using a variety of resources*” (Humphreys and Wyatt 2014: 60).

As can be seen, Chen’s students and Humphreys and Wyatt’s ones were offered different learning strategies to help them become better learners. Other examples of learning strategies could be using contextual clues to read and listen effectively, the value of organising and grouping words, the value of predict or infer meaning from the context or how to self-monitor their own activities. Such strategies are very valuable in mixed-ability classes because it is thought that if students think about how they do things, and then choose appropriate strategies to do them, they will be more successful.

Finally before moving to it, it is important to keep in mind that the whole learning process must be built up around the specific characteristics of our students and that they need to develop learning strategies to become autonomous learners, involving the development of some strategies in order to be an efficient learner. So following Scott Thornbury’s view, “*What may work for one learner may not be effective for another. A less prescriptive approach might be to offer the learners a “menu” of learner strategies and invite them to experiment until they find the ones that best suit them*” (Thornbury, 2006: 116).

#### **2.2.5. Learning Difficulties**

Attention to diversity has turned into a matter of common interests for all educational administrations, understanding that not all children can progress if they are supported appropriately according to their learning difficulties.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that catering for learning needs is complex, particularly if the range of abilities is wide or if we have to cope with special educational needs. Defining the limits of learning difficulties is not exactly easy. This term is usually applied for those students whose learning problems are not to be found in physical, sensory or intellectual impairment.

Westwood (2008) considered that “*students with learning difficulties comprise the largest group of students with special needs attending mainstream schools*” (Westwood, 2008: 103). In most learning contexts, the term learning difficulties is identified with students who show no clear curricular progress, especially in the basic skills.

In Westwood’s view, “*(...) learning difficulties are not uncommon in schools. In a few cases, they may be the results of a specific learning disability; but they are much more likely to be due to environmental factors such as social disadvantage, inappropriate curriculum, inadequate teaching, or lack of positive support for learning*” (Westwood, 2008: 104-105).

Special educational needs can take many forms, in other words, there may be an endless list of possible causes of learning disabilities, since each child is unique and reacts in different ways to their immediate surroundings. What, then, should English teachers do when they find students with special educational needs in the classroom?

Moon (2005) draws the natural heterogeneity in any group with a simple sentence: “*children come in all types*” and suggests some possible ways to succeed in organizing an appropriate response:

- Planning differentiated activities so that children can progress on their own level.
- Giving enough time and promote autonomous learning strategies in which children are monitored by the teacher.

- Catering for all needs through different strategies: integration in heterogeneous groups, assignation for challenging but at the same time reachable goals or roles in the group, and the like. Catering for the students' lack of interest and motivation through interesting and appealing engaging tasks.
- Managing group dynamics such peer tutoring, differentiating tasks or establishing several levels of achievement (Moon, 2005:49).

On the other hand, Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) wrote about the importance of minimizing the problem students with special needs face, considering that “*a blind student is a student first and blind or visually impaired second*” (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003: 589). Thus, in spite of the student's disability, we, as teachers, have the duty of promoting the highest learning potential within our students, looking for each individual students' strengths, not their weaknesses, and making the most of those.

Additionally, Edwards (2005) warns about not to panic when dealing with students with learning difficulties because “*it may take a little time for you and your students to adjust to each other, but with mutual cooperation you will find a way*” (Edwards 2005:20). Such mutual cooperation also means consulting colleagues and other experts to see if they can help and, also favouring parental involvement.

#### **2.2.6. The age factor**

Harmer (2008) adds another variable to be considered when teaching content and language integrated learning in a mixed-ability class. He refers to the age factor. It is widely known that adults and children do not learn in the same way, indeed, most linguists agreed that children are better prepared to learn a language that adults at an auditory and phonological level, because their brain has a natural capacity that diminishes as the years go by.

Harmer (2008) sustains that “*adults may easily rely on formal features of the language, such grammatical functions, whilst children seem to be more successful than adults when it comes to the phonological system, in other words, the sounds of the language, even being able to reproduce native-like accents*” (Harmer, 2008: 80).



But the question would be: do young children learn faster and more efficiently than any other age group? Harmer (2008) considers that “*the story of child language facility may be something of a myth*” (Harmer 2008: 80). It is true that those children who start learning a new language at early stages have a facility to accurately imitate the sounds of the language which is sometimes denied older learners.

On one hand, Lynne Cameron (2003) suggests that “*children reproduce the accents of their teachers with deadly accuracy*” (Cameron, 2003: 111). Also, their natural spontaneity comes in handy when learning a foreign language because, generally, they have less inhibiting factors. At the same time, our students’ age will affect the choice of topics and types of activities, which must be adapted to their age and interests.

On the other hand, Lightbown and Spada (2013) defend that those children from about twelve years old through the adolescence actually do better than younger learners provided the right circumstances (Lightbown and Spada 2013: 92).

Subsequently, it is generally accepted that young children are enthusiastic about learning and learn best throughout games, songs and enjoyable activities using everything in the physical world for learning and understanding things. They use their language skills without analysis why or how they use them.

Apart from that, children do like to do it well, they love being praised and we cannot deny the power of their imagination which sometimes makes them hard to differentiate between fact and fiction. Children do not have a lot of concentration span and they often do not understand the adult world although they are comfortable with the idea that there are rules and routines for things. When children start to grow up, these characteristics start to change and they can make decisions about their own learning, understand abstract concepts and have a strong sense of what is fair and right.

Hence, good teachers need to have these main points into account specially in a mixed-ability class, in order to be successful, a teacher needs to have a rich learning experience to encourage students to get information in a great variety of ways and sources. Working at different levels, individually and in groups, developing strong relationships among them and planning flexible activities in a comfortable environment.

As years go by, we move to the teenage world, as Simon Pearlman puts it, “*some challenging behaviour from teenagers is understandable, perhaps inevitable and maybe even desirable*”. (Pearlman 2009: 43).

On Woodward’s behalf (2012) teenagers get bored by activities that last too long, or by slow-pace lessons. This author considered that teenagers may have problems with authority and get irritated if they do not see the reason for activities. However, we need to keep in mind, that adolescents have passionate attachment to interests such as music or sport and they are frequently deeply involve in and with the lives of their peer group. Quoting Woodward (2012),

A key ingredient of successful teaching of this age group is to do what we do relevant to the students’ lives. They may not understand the importance of studying, but if we can relate what we are doing to their own lives we can hope for their genuine engagement in what is happening in the classroom (Woodwards, 2012: 37).

### **2.3. Setting goals**

Setting goals should be seen as a way of identifying strengths and areas to work on, based on the variables previously identified. The goals that are set acknowledged the needs and preferences expressed by individuals, and attempt to find opportunities to engage them. At the same time, it is important to identify group goals that reflect the shared needs and preferences of the class.

Adlem (2009), “*there is a clear link between setting goals or achieving positive outcomes*”. They differentiate both concepts by saying that “*setting goals can focus minds, while achieving goals lead to a feeling of success*” (Adlem, 2009: 15).

In mixed-ability classroom, students should be given an active and participatory role to play in setting goals wherever possible, rather than always being presented with a list of goals that have been drawn up by the teacher. In reference to this, Tomlinson, (1999) propose that the goals of each lesson could be written on the board during the development of the activity or the lesson, so children can keep in mind “*their goal*

*during the lesson so that they can take note of their progress and at the end of the class day they should be asked to check if they have reached that goal”* (Tomlinson, 1999: 19). It would be a kind of self-evaluation.

Other researchers such as Harlen and Malcolm (1997) pointed out that teachers should also set goals for themselves, *“keeping in mind the objectives they would like to meet with the group and the methods they intent to use for that purpose”* (Harlen and Malcolm 1997: 32).

Fisher (2001) sustains that it is important to make a differentiation between class goals and personal goals. For him it is necessary to formulate the specific steps that need to be taken in order to achieve the end result the teacher is looking for, this way, he says *“checking progress can become an established routine and an integral part of classroom procedure”* (Fisher, 2001: 41).

In short, it is essential to highlight that in mixed-ability classes goals should be stated clearly and made public, in order to be aware of them. Students should be encouraged to identify both language-learning goals ad attitude goals, and to think about how they can be applied to learning both inside and outside the classroom.

### **3. STRATEGIES TO MANAGE MIXED-ABILITY IN THE CLIL CLASSROOM**

After having considered the main factors in a mixed ability class, we will concentrate on the most important strategies to manage with mixed-ability or heterogeneous language classes in a CLIL environment.

Once inside the classroom, teachers have to *‘think on their feet’*. This has traditionally called *‘reflection-in-action’* (Schön 1983: 2) but in reality, thinking on our feet is what teachers do all the time. We make decisions about what to do next on the basis of what is happening at that very moment. With so many suggestions about how we should teach, it is hard to know whether to turn and what method, if any, to choose.

Some educators advocates of the humanistic methods, other teachers and educational institutions, however, tend to examine a range of different methods to see what they have to offer. Szesztay (2004) suggests that when we have to choose the right method in the act of teaching, “*we draw on skills, knowledge and intuition al at the same time*” (Szesztay 2004: 130) in order to reach to things like experiencing difficulties, or decision whether to correct or not.

In the following lines, we will focus on methodology and the roles of both, teacher and students in a mixed-ability class.

### **3.1. Methodology**

Teaching a mixed-ability class should be focused on allowing each individual pupil not only to reach success in their learning progress but as well to learn as individuals. We, as teachers, cannot deny the fact that it is less probable to be successful if we only focused on whole class teaching. Fisher (2001) suggested that many students do not achieve their full potential because they are told “*to make a journey but they have no map*” (Fisher, 2001: 1). In other words, our students will not be able to overcome difficulties while learning if they have not learnt how to learn. Hence teachers should act as a role model for learning and teach them how to become autonomous, independent and effective learners.

There is no doubt that students will be much more motivated if they understand the aim of a lesson, if they have some input and feedback and if they have been taught learning techniques and strategies. So, the teacher should reflect on the classroom practice and methodologies, being a facilitator of learning, in words of Tomlinson (1999) “*a secure teacher comes away from today with important questions to puzzle about overnight and the believe that today contains the insights necessary for a more effective tomorrow*” (Tomlinson, 1999: 209).

In short, we need to move away from traditional models methodologies that focused on teaching items of language in isolation with the teacher as the authority in the classroom and learners were seen as passive recipients of knowledge. In this regard, some light should be shed on the basic principles of an inclusive education when arranging our

class activities which must be at the heart of our actions, activities where pupils have to rely on both HOTS (higher order thinking skills) and LOTS (lower order thinking skills). This distinction amongst application of cognitive skills based on updated perspective of Bloom's taxonomy shall ensure a clear progression, from controlled to more complex and demanding tasks requiring a higher level of autonomy which is a key component in mixed-ability classes.

Similarly, I would like to highlight the influence that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) will have in this proposal. In accordance with Marsh (2010) "*CLIL is a dual focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for learning and teaching of both language and content*" (Marsh, 2010:1).

### **3.1.1. Student-centred Approach**

It was Rebecca Oxford (1990) who wrote about a change in focus from the teacher to the learner "*from exclusive focus on the improvement of teaching to an increased concern for how learners go about their learning task in a second language*" (Oxford, 1990: 5). As well, in 1977 Strevens said that learner-centred educational outlook was "*sweeping rough much of the world*" (Strevens, 1977: 5). While Nunan (1990) suggested that "*the learner-centred approach is based on the idea that learners can learn better when they are aware of their own goals. In this model, students' needs and learning styles are considered before selecting content and teaching methodologies*" (Nunan 1990: 87).

This means that the whole learning process must be built up around the characteristics of our students and that they need to develop learning strategies to become autonomous and efficient learners.

All in all, students will be considered the centre of the teaching process, which means that the starting point for the activities, tasks and projects must be their needs, interests and previous knowledge, following what Hutchinson and Waters wrote (1990), "*the starting point for all language teaching should be an understanding of how people learn*" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1990: 39).

Subsequently, along this emphasis on the learner instead of the teacher there are some considerations and ideas that are specially learner-centred and it is important to keep these in mind:

- We should follow an active and participatory teaching methodology, taking learners into account when planning objectives, contents, activities and materials. Having in mind the authenticity of both language contents and materials, which is important to “*generate classroom activities which simulate genuine communication in the classroom in the hope that this will facilitate transfer of learning*” from classroom to outside -or real world- second language use (Nunan, 1990:90).
- The whole teaching and learning process should be built around the characteristics of our students. In other words, students should be considered the protagonists of the communication process, being responsible of their learning and keeping an active role. A. McLean (1990) points out, “*Learning is most effective when the learner is the initiator of the learning process*” (McLean, 1990: 17).
- In a student-centred approach, teachers should encourage learners to use the language in a creative way, in other words, students should be invited to experiment with new content in a second language. We cannot forget that our classes must be dynamic and involving our students in the organization and developing of different activities will make the teaching more effective.
- The learning experience should consider problem-based learning in order to help our students to be autonomous and reflective and to develop critical thinking throughout their learning process. Concisely, learners are made responsible for their own learning. According to J. Taylor (2002), “*A certain degree of autonomy is always worth encouraging because it raises motivation and speeds up progress*” (Taylor, 2002:8).

Involving students actively in the learning process also implies encouraging students to understand the learning goals and activities. There is no doubt that in this approach, teachers pay special attention to learners’ individual needs when they are preparing the syllabus, the materials or the texts to be used in the classroom.

Quoting Nunan (1990) “*The learner-centred approach to teaching content in a second language offers a stimulating, effective and rewarding -though time-consuming- alternative to those teachers who are willing to try something different and promising in a mixed-ability environment*” (Nunan 1990:95).

### **3.1.2. Planning differentiated activities in a mixed-ability class**

According to Harmer and Thornbury (2013) “*the best teachers are those who think carefully about what they are going to do in their classes and who plan how they are going to organise the teaching and learning*”, (Harmer and Thornbury, 2013: 229). Thus, this involves that teachers need to think about the context of who we are teaching, where we are teaching, what materials and technology we have available and crucially, which our students’ characteristics are, in order to ensure a teaching of quality to each individual.

Accordingly, in a mixed-ability group we need to have a range of activities and tasks, and we need to think about how we can differentiate our activities varying the levels of ability but which share the same common core. Therefore, we could say that designing a task firstly involves identifying a meaningful objective that we would like our learners to achieve.

Dudley and Osväth (2016) encourage us to ask ourselves the following questions “*What is the end product of the task going to be?*” and “*What are these learners good at?*” (Dudley and Osväth 2016:56). These authors consider that the answer depends on the individuals in the group, and once the idea for the task is in place and has been developed we can begin to think about language.

Harmer (2008) suggested that one possibility is to provide different learners with an activity that has been differentiated according to the language level (See Annex 1). This author proposed an example of a reading comprehension activity where there are various alternative versions of a text, one version to be more accessible for those students who does not feel very confident yet, and another version adapted to make it more challenging for those students who highlight and find his skill easier,

...Thus, for example we might give student A a text from an English language newspaper about a certain topic. Student B might be directed to a website on the same topic, but where the information is not so dense. Student C might look at a simplified reader on the topic, and we might provide Student D with a short text that we ourselves have created on the subject, written in such a way as to be comprehensible to them (Harmer, 2008: 144)

Harmer (2008) defended that *“by giving students alternatives ways of working with the same input we are enable them to work in their own way, at their level, and at their own pace”* (Harmer, 2008: 144).

Furthermore, Harmer (2008) advocated that in order to provoke learner autonomy within our mixed-ability students, we, as teachers could offer *“different choices to the students about what material they are going to work with”* (Harmer, 2008: 144). In other words, we might give our learners a set of exercises and they will be the ones who decide what they want to attempt.

In this line, Evans (2013) provoked this kind of individual choice by offering classes activity *“menus” with “main dishes”, “sides dishes” and “desserts”* (Evans, 2013: 287). This author defended that in order to make our students read outside the classroom, it has to be themselves the ones who take the risk and select which book to read, in terms of topic, genre and level, because in the Evans words, *“when they make their own choice, they are far more likely to read with enthusiasm”* (Evans, 2013: 287) .

Halliwell (1992) sustained it relevant not only to give different contents, as well creating our own materials because they will allow teachers to introduce, reinforce and recycle any aspects of the language that is relevant to the pupils, without having to stick to the syllabus established in a course book. These materials are especially useful when the book does not actually provide enough practice and has to be supplemented. According to her, in this way *“pupils will be more motivated since the teaching and learning process is adjusted to their needs”* (Halliwell, 1992: 133).

However, in spite of the great advantages of these proposals we cannot ignore the fact that it is a tough plan which involves extra hours of planning and careful preparation of



the materials to be used in class. Likewise giving feedback to students becomes more complicated and extremely problematic if we are dealing with large classes.

Thus, another option of differentiation would be giving students different tasks, Ur (2006) proposed offering students the same reading text, but making it accessible to everyone “*in terms of the task, we ask them to do in response to it*” (Ur, 2006: 39). That is to say, according to the students’ level, they would have to interpret information in the text to answer open-ended questions about that reading text or to choose the right answer in a multiple-choice activity.

Lindstromberg (2004) advocates the use of the same materials and tasks, but expecting and, what is more, accepting different students responses to those tasks. This author discusses about the importance of using flexible tasks “*which are tasks which make a virtue out of differences between the students*” (Lindstromberg, 2004: 3). Indeed this author added that

...the more proficient students have a clear but high target to aim for, but everyone, including those who are not so able, have something purposeful to do, even though they may not write as many sentences as their more able colleagues. In response to a reading text, we can give our students a number of tasks but know that not all of students will complete all of them (Lindstromberg, 2004: 3).

Following Lindstromberg’s guidelines, we could ask our students to complete a writing activity creating sentences from a text they have previously read and according to their level of proficiency they could write the maximum or the minimum number of sentences required.

Harmer (2008) considers relevant the fact of “*giving the students different roles or levels of support within a task*” (Harmer, 2008: 145). If our students are acting out in a drama activity questioning themselves, the teacher could give them which questions would be appropriate or not to ask, which tenses, which vocabulary to use in case they need more level of support, whereas if the students have a good level of proficiency, it would be themselves the ones who decide what to ask and how, so at the end everyone in the class have the opportunity to express themselves and giving them the necessary level of guidance.

As we can see, differentiating the output allows student to engage with topics in their own way by responding to open questions and prompts, rather than closed questions. In these cases, students do not all produce the same outcome. If we let students activate their own preferences and use the language they already know, then more personalized outcomes are possible.

Prodromou and Clandfield (2007) defended this idea too by saying that with differentiated tasks the teacher is “*allowing the slower ones the satisfaction of completing a task successfully*” (Prodromou and Clandfield 2007:58), and he considered of vital importance to provide to offer extension activities for those students who may finish earlier than others in order to avoid discipline problems due to lack of interest. However, this author emphasised that when the teacher offers students extension activities, these should be seen as a reward to their effort and a stimulous challenge further, rather than an demanding extra work.

Finally, it is worth pointing out what Scrivener (2005) defended

When we plan lessons, we need to remember that we are planning something that may not be appropriate for some and may be easy or difficult for others, etc., which is why the planning is only one part of structuring a lesson. In the act of teaching, we need to constantly notice and respond to feedback in order to adjust and redirect work moment by moment to make it as effective for each individual as possible (Scrivener, 2005: 69).

### ***3.1.3. Grouping students***

There is no limit to the way in which we, as teachers, can group our students in the classroom. However, teaching a mixed-ability class as a whole, individually or having them perform a task in pairs or small groups have their advantages and disadvantages, indeed each of these kind of grouping might be more or less appropriate for different activities and different situations.

Thus, thinking about how to group the students in a mixed ability class is essential that is why doing a further diagnostic assessment and needs analysis can be very useful in a class with varying levels of ability.

William and Burden (1997) think that whole-class grouping reinforce a sense of belonging among the group members, something which we, as teachers need to foster (1997:23) while Senior (2002) sustains that if language learners is a collective endeavour, then “*learning takes place most effectively when language classes pull together as unified groups*”. This kind of “*pulling together*” will be greatly enhanced by “*class-centred teachers*”, who help to create a “*higher proportion of classes hat function in a cohesive manner*” (Senior 2002: 136-137).

However, Dudley and Osväth (2016) disagree with these authors, considering that frontal teaching does little to address the differences of level in mixed-ability groups, considering that in whole-class activities, being called on to give a response can make weaker learners feel as if they are being single out (2016: 54).

On the other hand, Adlen (2009) sustains that it is good to have a balance between group work, pair work and whole class activities and individual work. This author encourages teachers to create “*cooperative learning groups where students work interdependently to achieve a common goal which is of benefit to each individual and to the group as a whole*” (Adlen, 2009: 102). In order to do so, the teacher must be flexible and regrouping students when it is necessary. There might be times when it would be better having higher level students working together while the teacher support the lower level ones. Other times it would be better to work as a whole mingling activities such as a class survey, in those situations stronger students can still weaker ones by pairing up with them in such activities.

Harmer (2008) highlights the numerous advantages of grouping students in pairs, he considers that this kind of grouping

...increases the amount of speaking time, allows students to work and interact independently without the necessary guidance of the teacher, allows teacher time to work with one or two pairs who need more support or challenging activities while the rest of the students continue working and allows students to share responsibility by taking decisions (Harmer, 2008:183).

Thus, we could say that using either pair work or group work on a regular basis will offer greater variety within activities, it will help to build students' confidence specially for those weaker ones who can benefit from working with students at a higher level, and similarly, students with more ability will gain insight about the language and content by helping their classmates.

Furthermore, this kind of grouping will help students to achieve optimal levels of participation and relationships in the group-class, students will work with a number of different students on the same lesson, and, over the course of a term, with everyone in the class.

Having said that, the next question would be how to group the students? Is it better to group learners of the same level together or not?

Carless (2006) advises grouping students of the same level together because *“it enables the teacher to prepare input materials that have been differentiated to suit their needs”* (Carless, 2006: 329). Ellis (2004) agrees that *“in this way learners can be provided with extra support and can also benefit from further explanations, if necessary. At the same time, stronger learners can be provided with additional challenges that allow them to work autonomously when they are grouped together”* (Ellis, 2004: 527).

Another way of grouping is to put learners of different language levels together, ensure that each small group contains both stronger and weaker learners. This encourages learners to help each other and learn from each other, while also enabling other important skills such as social skills and tolerance to be developed.

In the words of Candlin (1980)

“...because the emphasis is much more on students helping each other, the teacher's role is more of a facilitator than an instructor. Although mixed groups offer rich opportunities for collaboration and cooperation between students, it is important to monitor the interaction and provide reassurance to both stronger and weaker learners” (Candlin, 1980: 231).

Finally, McMiller and Boyer (2012) claimed that grouping does not have to be determined by language level. They consider that in project work, for example, choice of topic can be a criterion for grouping. And “occasionally”, they said, “*you might wish to group students randomly. Random grouping provide variety and ensure that students do not always work with the same people*” (McMiller and Boyer, 2012: 50).

In short, as we previously pointed out, the way in which students are grouped should be flexible enough as to be change. So that they can receive sufficient input and also provide opportunities to use the foreign language while learning new content.

### **3.2. Role of the teacher in a mixed-ability classroom**

According to Breen and Candlin (1980) “*the role of the teacher can be divided into three main categories: facilitator of the communicative process, participant or observer and learner*” (Candlin, 1989: 235). On the other hand, Harmer (2008) creates a more specific classification of the roles of the teacher distinguishing between various categories, controller, organiser, monitor, prompter, and tutor (Harmer, 2008:116).

Role as controller, in this role the teacher is the transmitter of knowledge, he or she gives the information and tells the students what steps to follow presenting a dominant position. In this role the students follow instructions leading to a lack of autonomy, Harmer (2008) considers that this role “*may be necessary for some organisational and informational work because the teacher do need to explain things sometimes, and because whole-class teaching does have a number of advantages*” (Harmer, 2008:118). However, it would be unsuccessful if this is the only role we take on.

Role as organiser, this is one of the most important roles performed by the teachers, indeed authors like Libow and Stager (2013) defined this role as “*the most difficult and important role the teacher has to play because the success of many activities depends on good organization and on the students knowing exactly what they are to do*”. (Libow and Stager, 2013: 221-222). We could say that this role consists on organizing students to carry out various activities, giving them the necessary information to succeed and grouping them according to the needs of the task.

Before getting students to face an activity, we must ensure that they understand what they are asked to do, and also that they are motivated and engaged. The teacher also needs to make sure that everyone is provided with equal opportunities for participation. This is the role that Harmer (2008) defined as “*task-setter*” (Harmer, 2008:117), considering that it is the role where the teacher does their best to engage students with the task and explaining them clearly what we would like them to do.

Role as monitor or observer, this role is about observing our students’ performances, keeping an eye on what is happening and in words of Harmer (2008) making sure that “*they are doing what they are supposed to be doing (and if they are not, we can refocus their attention to keep them ‘on task’), but it is also so we can gather information about what they are saying*” (Harmer, 2008: 116). This role has a very clear advantage because with the information gathered throughout daily observations, teachers could adapt their feedback and decisions according to the students’ performances and needs.

Role as prompter or editor, teachers acting as editors or prompters is essential in a mixed-ability environment. When students are immersed in an oral activity, the teacher should avoid breakdowns in communication by suggesting or exemplifying instead of giving them the answer straight away and avoiding them to take the initiative. Indeed Harmer (2008) “*the feedback we give them in such circumstances is entirely different from correction, since its purpose is to make suggestions and help the students to write or speak better, rather than telling them what they have wrong*” (Harmer, 2008: 117).

Resource and tutor, in this role the teacher acts as a coach, guide or resource when students are involved in a particular projects, self-study or whatever writing activity in which they need to clarify spelling rules for example. The teacher provides advice and help learners clarify ideas. In words of Harmer (2008) “*the chance to give single students – or pair or small groups – our undivided attention to help them with their work is invaluable*” (Harmer, 2008: 117).

Furthermore, Dudley and Osväth (2016) suggested that one of the most difficult aspects of the teacher’s role in the mixed-ability classroom is finding a way to make input more accessible and relevant to learners of different language levels, that is why teacher should adopt a role of “*language instructor*”, finding the balance between the levels of

the “*strongest*” and “*weakest*” learners in the group, because in their words “*if input is pitched in the middle of the range, it is immediately accessible to a higher proportion of the students, while weaker and stronger learners can be provided with the additional support and extra challenges that they require*” (Dudley and Osväth, 2016: 54).

The key of the teacher in mixed ability groups is that of facilitating learning by enabling individuals of all levels and abilities to feel sufficiently challenged in the lesson. It is the responsibility of the teacher to reach out to all learners, making sure that they not only understand what is being asked of them, but also that they are involved and motivated to take part. So, due to the relevance of the learner-centred approach, learners’ needs and experiences become central to the educational process.

In this context, the students’ experiences and not the performance of the teacher are at the heart of the foreign language classroom. Therefore, the teacher is not seen as the controller and transmitter of knowledge; but rather as a facilitator of learning who creates the necessary conditions for communication in the foreign language to take place. Hence, the teacher will no longer impose the learning rhythm, being the centre of knowledge, having the last word and communicating in a unidirectional way, but he is guider and facilitator of the learning process.

#### **4. ASSESSMENT IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES**

One of the greatest challenges facing teachers of mixed-ability classes is assessing learners. According to Harmer (2008) “*assessment, can, and should be an integral part of what teachers do, when used appropriately, assessment helps the students to understand what they can and cannot do, and by doing this, help them move forward and see clearly what they need to do next*” (Harmer, 2008: 408).

On their behalf, Dudley and Osväth (2016) agreed with Harmer and pointed out that “*assessment plays a crucial role in giving learners a clear idea of where they are and in motivating them to improve further*” (Dudley and Osväth 2016: 77).

However, for some authors like Hadfield (2012) traditional grading based on uniformly administered tests can be “*an inefficient and potentially harmful means of evaluation*

*which hinders motivation and can develop what he defines as learned helplessness*” (Hadfield, 2012: 139), in other words, the inability to overcome new situations, as well as generating a negative attitude towards learning new things. All of these factors can combine to create feelings of failure in the learners especially for those who already have lower self-confidence.

Thus, and due to the fact that they learn at different rates and in different ways, students in the mixed-ability classroom are best served if they are allowed to deal with tests in relation to their current stage of ability.

Purpura (2014) advises that in order to reduce stress and anxiety, learners should be allowed to focus on the language areas of a test that they are good at. For the same reason, they should be given the chance to tackle the test in smaller, more manageable chunks. It is undeniable that the pressure to complete long tests in a set time can also be stressful. If learners are able to go through the test at their own pace, however, their chances of completing the tasks to the best of their ability are improved. Purpura (2014) suggests that *“we should be aiming for a more flexible testing framework, providing learners with opportunities for reflection and relearning”* (Purpura 2014: 535).

Finally, learners should be clearly aware of the minimum requirements and at the same time, be given a reasonable chance to achieve them.

#### **4.1. Continuous assessment**

Continuous assessment measures the students’ abilities as part of a process. Crucially, the students as well as the teacher are involved in this assessment being a part of the learning process itself rather than just focusing exclusively on what students have been achieved up to a given point of time. So, as Harmer (2008) pointed out, *“this assessment focuses on helping the students’ progress to the next level, rather than simply judging them on what they can do”*. He suggests some principles that the continuous assessment should include, such as focusing on how students learn, being a key professional skill for teachers and promoting understanding of goals and criteria (Harmer, 2008: 413).



In the case of mixed-ability groups, one particularly appropriate continuous-assessment technique is using a test box. The test box allows learners to focus on smaller and more manageable parts of language they have studied in a personalized way and gives them opportunities to reflect on their own work.

Libow and Stager (2013) added that test box has the advantage of “*providing the students with the necessary space for in-between learning. The self-confidence of learners is boosted by being able to see the progress they are making as they go through the test step by step at their own pace* (Libow and Stager, 2013: 145).

#### **4.2. Self-assessment**

Undoubtedly our main aim when doing this assessment in class is helping students to do it better. It is important to keep in mind that if students can clearly identify their own strengths and weaknesses, then their learning can be put into their own hands. In self-assessment, learners should set personalized learning goals for themselves, organizing action plans in order to suit their language level and learning preferences. And Purpura (2014) considers that this kind of assessment has to “*reflect on and analyse students’ own work and Learners should take responsibility for evaluating their own work*” (Purpura 2014: 537).

Dudley and Osväth (2016) emphasize the benefits of self-assessment in mixed-ability classes; they consider that self-assessment enables learners to take control on their own learning through setting goals and checking progress. And, they said that “*over time, it also enables students to compare their past and current levels of knowledge*” (Dudley and Osväth 2016: 168) so, we could say that learners can see the extent of their improvement, sustaining their motivation to learn.

In mixed-ability groups, stronger and weaker learners benefit from self-assessment in different ways. Libow and Stager (2013) suggest that “*self-assessment pushes learners to identify areas for improvement; it is a tool that helps students to realize about their own strengths too, so they can use them to help others*”. Ultimately, all learners come to see that what these authors named “*race*” is not against others but against themselves (Libow and Stager, 2013: 149).

For these reasons if we want our students to be truly engaged in their learning, elements of self-assessment should be introduced together with traditional methods of assessment.

### **4.3. Portfolio assessment**

Dudley and Osväth (2016) define a portfolio as “*a retrospective collective of different types of work over a period of time*” (Dudley and Osväth, 2006: 153) The student can then be assessed based on three or four of the best pieces of work produced during this period.

Portfolio assessment offers both the teacher and the student’s flexibility, ensuring that personal strengths are highlighted in the final selection. For Nunes (2004) portfolio assessment has clear benefits because it provides evidence of students’ effort and at the same time it helps students to become more autonomous and it can “*foster students’ reflection and help them to self-monitor their own learning*”. (Nunes 2004: 334). However portfolio assessment is not without its pitfalls. Lam and Lee (2009) found that it is time-consuming for students to build up their portfolios, and it suggests longer hours of evaluation for the teachers. And, teachers will need clear training on how to select items from the portfolio and how to grade them.

So, when implementing portfolio assessment in a mixed-ability class, the first thing is to familiarize students with the concept of portfolio and its elements assigning a certain points value for each element of the portfolio and setting minimum points target that the students need to collect in total in order to meet the requirement of the course.

Finally, Lam and Lee (2009) propose that digital portfolio work particularly well with teenagers.

*“If the portfolio tasks are mostly done in digital formats such as power point presentations or podcasts, they could all be uploaded onto a free digital platform and the great benefit of this, according to these authors is that not only can students learn from each other’s work, but they can also comment on it.”*  
(Lam and Lee 2009: 57)

## **5. PROMOTING CREATIVITY AND EXPRESSION IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES**

In a CLIL environment where we have groups made up of individuals with a variety of abilities, we should encourage all students to use their imaginative thinking by engaging them in playful activities that connect to their previous language experiences and knowledge. In fact, a project work contributes to promote a creative environment.

Creativity is an essential feature of the individual. It is expressed in terms of imagination, open-mindedness and self-confidence. In this sense, Dörnyei (2014) states that “*creativity entails a disposition and an aptitude to do something new and innovative, indeed the development of creativity involves flexibility, originality and the ability to suggest new ideas and solve problems*” (Dörnyei, 2014: 87).

Creative language skill and expressions that student practice into the classroom; teachers have the duty to provide them with a comfortable atmosphere that can provoke the active construction of the language. That is why a project work is so important, because they generate the desire to communicate in a creative way using content and language in an integrative way.

### **5.1. Project work as an effective resource**

Working on projects offers the students a chance to do something different that brings variety to the lesson as well as a real sense of achievement. This is an opportunity that allows students to use in practice the theoretical contents they have been working on. In his writings Hutchinson and Waters (1994) claims that “*learning contents in a second language can often be something unreal and remote which has a negative effect on motivation*” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1994: 32). Fried-Booth (1996) agrees and adds that there is a big gap between “*the language our students are taught and the language they fact require*” (Fried-Booth, 1996: 23). Both authors defend that this gap can be bridged by using project work because learners use their knowledge in a meaningful and creative way.

The activities included in a project work enable interaction and cooperation between learners within groups, leading to end products that reflect the personalities, strengths and interests of each member of the group. According to Senior (2006) the right grouping “*can provide a strong team feeling within a class and engender good working atmosphere*” (Senior, 2006: 98). Dudley and Osväth (2016) consider that one of the benefits of project work is that enables students to

...pool their linguistic and non-linguistic skills to create personalized and authentic pieces of work with minimal reliance on the teachers. It allows for self-expression and produces a tangible outcome, which can take the form of presentations, videos, magazines and booklets, blog entries, podcasts and paper or online posters (Dudley and Osväth 2016: 105).

The facts that project are completed for a specific audience motivates learners to use the language conscientiously, resulting in better outcomes and higher self-esteem. As well, they take greater responsibility and promote learning independently.

If we focus on how project work and CLIL, Woodward (2012) considers that “*This technique provides children with the opportunity to bring their knowledge gained in other school subjects such as history, music, art, science, geography or drama and extending it during the work on the project*” (Woodward, 2012: 31). In other words, project work can be understood as a complement of the syllabus. On the other hand, it is important to point out that the project work should not be seen as a mere way of teaching content, because it includes the development of a full range of skills which should be naturally integrated and used in balanced. For example, it is very likely that the first stages of the project involved mainly the speaking skills, because students need to choose the right topic and discuss about it; however in the next stages, reading, writing and listening will be also included.

Regarding the length of time invest on a project, Fried-Booth (1996) states that there are some stages when develop a project work.

Firstly, there is a “*stimulus*” so the students comment, suggest and have an initial discussion of the idea of the project. Secondly, there is a “*definition of the project objective*”, and then a “*practice of language skills*” that takes place followed by a

“*design of written materials*” such questionnaires, maps or grids. Next, in order to gather information inside and outside the classroom there is a stage called “*collating information*” which is usually organized in groups and supported by the teacher. Afterwards, the students invest some to “*organize materials*” and develop the end product of the project (Fried-Booth, 1996: 34).

Finally, we cannot forget the “*final presentation*”. Edwards (2015) added that another important stage is the evaluation which can take at the end of each lesson or at the end of the whole project, children should see what they learn, compare the information they have acquired during the project and discuss their own experience through the different stages of the project. (Edwards 2015: 20). While Evans (2013) points out that the final presentation of the end product is “*one of the most important features of the project*”. (Evans, 2013: 290).

Fried-Booth (1996) defines the role of the teacher in the project work, as a “participant, coordinator when necessary, a figure in the background evaluating and monitoring the language being used”. Senior (2006) considers that the teacher should take an active part at the beginning of the project explaining the most important points to the whole class and clarifying the new language. Once students are left on their own to develop their creativity, the teacher should be a monitor and facilitator, encouraging students to think and reflect about the project: Pinter (2006) defined the role of the teacher as a “*figure in the background who act as a guide in the project*” (Pinter 2006: 5).

## **5.2. Didactic Application. Pablo Picasso is in the class**

In the following lines, I will put into practice the theory dealt along these pages by making a lesson plan of what could be various stages within a hypothetical project whose name might be ‘Picasso is coming to our classroom’

This CLIL lesson is meant to be for a group of mixed-ability students from Year 4 and integrates and Craft and English with a key focus on Cubism and Picasso.

Objectives

- To know about Cubism looking at the work of Pablo Picasso.
- To talk about Picasso's abstract portrait.
- To write descriptive sentences about a Picasso's Cubist Portraits.
- To know differences between realistic and abstract portraits.
- To develop a wide range of art and design technique such as making a collage.
- To use collage materials to make an abstract portrait

First of all, the teacher writes the name of Pablo Picasso on the board and questions their students if they have any knowledge of Pablo Picasso, or the work produce by this artist. This first brainstorming activity will help the teacher to have an initial idea about their students' pre-knowledge of Picasso.

Secondly, students will watch a short video (adapted to their linguistic level) to introduce who Picasso was and how his work changed from realistic portraits to more abstract. The video would be followed by spoken questions about the information students have gathered from it, checking if their previous knowledge was right or wrong, and asking them about new ideas they have discovered.

It is important to emphasize that there is not a valid answer for this first stages, it would be an activity which serves the teacher to collect information about students pre-knowledge.

In the next stage, we move to a reading task about Cubism and how Picasso's portraits were painted. The same reading could be offered to students in three different versions according to our students' level of support. Some students will need more support at a linguistic level while other would be totally independent and autonomous while doing the task. Those students who need more guidance would have pictures of key words, or definitions of vocabulary might find difficult.

In case, we have fast finishers within our class, we could give them another task such as searching more information about cubism on internet, completing a word-search or crosswords about key vocabulary of the topic or another option would be, giving them

the role of helpers of those students who need more support, by doing this we are creating a sense of collaboration within our class.

To do the next stage of this project, the teacher would work as organizer, and he or she would divide the class into heterogeneous and small groups. Each group has to search on Internet a Picasso's Cubist portrait, such as The Weeping Woman, or Seated Woman Resting on Elbows without telling it to the members of the other groups, and later on, each group of students should write as many descriptive sentences as they can. They can write about colours, shapes and main features of the work of Art chosen but without saying which work of Art is. This time, the teacher would work as tutor, so students could ask her or him for guidance while writing descriptive sentences.

After that, the students as a whole-class would play a guessing game trying to figure out which sentences describe which portrait without making evident their own sentences.

In the next stage of this project, learners work in pairs and they should compare two Picasso portraits, one of the more realistic and the other one more abstract. In turns, each member of the pair would answer questions like:

Which portrait uses brighter colors?

Which picture looks more like a photo or real life?

Which work of art is more abstract?

Which portrait includes shapes and colors to add to the portrait?

What do you think about this painting?

How do these paintings make you feel?

How do you think Picasso was feeling when he painted them?

In this communicative task, the teacher would work as monitor and feedback provider as well as a observer. Those students who finish faster will have more challenge questions like the last two ones written above, while the learners who need more support will answer the first questions with teachers' guidance.

The final result of this project would be making a collage portrait individually. The teacher would give students some materials to do it such as cuts from magazines,

cardboard, and other materials. But students should use their creativity and imagination. Everyone could have the possibility of using a template shows children where to stick different features, but they are free to use it or not.

Finally, the Art and Craft and the English teacher would work together to create a exhibition of this project so the family members of the children could visit.

As self-assessment and feedback, both teachers would encourage children to reflect on the work of art they have student and made themselves.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Teachers cannot avoid having heterogeneous or mixed-ability classrooms, so instead of hoping for a homogeneous group, it is better to accept the reality we are dealing with and certain strategies to ensure effective learning for each of the individuals within our group. The strategies that have been mentioned throughout this paper will help teachers to minimize the challenges or difficulties that each student face and, as with all differentiation, we, as teacher, do our best we can so that all our students can achieve their highest learning potential. We have to look for each individual student's strengths not their weaknesses, and make the most of those.

The theory, methodology and resources presented in this paper confirm that it is possible to deal with heterogeneous classes successfully. The first secret of teaching mixed-ability classes is to make sure that learners are learners and they are not defined by their special characteristics, intelligences or learning difficulties.

The teacher then, has to play a vital role addressing the issue as they need to design the lesson and contents in such a way that allow scopes for optimum learning for all learners choosing a wide range of classroom activities, resources and techniques that motivate and interest each of the students. Teacher should closely monitor every child in order to assess their gradual progression and ensure that everyone is achieving their full potential.



That is why, as we have seen, our teaching should be a mixture, whether possible, of individual support and inclusion. Inclusion is important for both, the student who may be experiencing difficulty, but also for the other students in the class. On the other hand, an understanding of the full and complex nature of the world we live in is important for children, so working with other students who have different abilities is, in itself, a profound and important learning experience.

For many students, clear routines have a calming effect promoting a sense of security and safety. As we have pointed out in previous pages, we, as teachers have the duty to explain exactly what is going to happen in the lesson, the goals, and giving a supportive feedback to make the learning process successful to all students. Personalizing the tasks when is required, making things appropriated for every students as individuals to encourage all students to activate their language learning because as Garrison (2004) said, “*A teacher is a compass that activates the magnets of curiosity, knowledge and wisdom in the pupils*”

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