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**Title:** Diversity in CLIL as experienced by Finnish CLIL teachers and students : matters of equality and equity

**Year:** 2023

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Nikula, T., Skinnari, K., & Mård-Miettinen, K. (2023). Diversity in CLIL as experienced by Finnish CLIL teachers and students : matters of equality and equity. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 26(9), 1066-1079. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2022.2028125>



# International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rbeb20>

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To cite this article: Tarja Nikula, Kristiina Skinnari & Karita Mård-Miettinen (2022): Diversity in CLIL as experienced by Finnish CLIL teachers and students: matters of equality and equity, International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2022.2028125](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2022.2028125)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2022.2028125>



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Published online: 28 Jan 2022.



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# Diversity in CLIL as experienced by Finnish CLIL teachers and students: matters of equality and equity

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how Finnish CLIL teachers and students orient to and experience diversity in CLIL. The data consist of teacher and student interviews that were analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurrent themes with regard to diversity. The findings indicate that the theme of equality in the sense of ‘the same for all’ in both teaching, assessing and homework was readily brought up by both groups, reflecting the ethos of equality prevalent in Finnish education. Equity, however, was not similarly highlighted even though it is a guiding principle alongside equality in the Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education. Teachers were found reluctant to topicalise diversity, at least in the form of explicit differentiation. This applied especially to academic skills, with students’ different linguistic skills more readily addressed. Both teacher and student interviews construct CLIL students as high-achievers in comparison to peers in regular classrooms. The students, however, also criticised being treated as a homogenous group and expressed wishes for personalised support. In sum, the findings show tensions between maintaining equality and securing equity in that adherence to the same type of education for all may render invisible the varying competences, ways of learning and needs for support.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2021


Accepted 7 January 2022

## KEYWORDS

CLIL in Finland; learner diversity; equality in education; equity in education

## Introduction

This article focuses on Finnish CLIL students’ and teachers’ perceptions and experiences of learner diversity; the study is a part of a larger project called ADiBE: Attention to Diversity in Bilingual Education (for more details, see the article by Pérez Cañado and Rascón Moreno in this special issue). The purpose of the project was to explore diversity from the perspective of how well CLIL caters for learners with different academic skills and ways of learning, and to offer suggestions for well-functioning practices for teachers on how to go about content and language integration in ways that benefit a diverse set of learners. While CLIL has gained popularity across Europe, and recent years have shown growing attention to teachers’ and students’ perceptions and beliefs as an influential factor (e.g. Morton 2018; Pladevall-Ballester 2015; Skinnari and Bovellan 2016), we still lack in-depth understanding of how teachers and students orient to catering for diversity in CLIL. For this purpose, the ADiBE project collected both questionnaire and interview data in six European countries to explore these stakeholders’ views on the matter.

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This study focuses on the Finnish context and on teacher and student interviews. The interviews complemented the ADiBE questionnaires in addressing diversity mainly from the perspective of differences among students in terms of learning paces, learning styles and expectations with regard to CLIL. In Finnish education, CLIL is officially referred to as bilingual education. However, we will in this article use the term CLIL in accordance with the ADiBE project's explicated focus. Initially, CLIL in Finland started as scattered and small-scale enterprises in the early 1990s and has since gained a relatively stable position. This is also visible in the more detailed attention paid to it in the latest Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education from 2014 (EDUFI 2014), published in English in 2016 (EDUFI 2016). Although CLIL can no longer be regarded as a novelty or a mere grassroots phenomenon, the latest national survey from 2017 shows that the number of CLIL programmes in Finland is not growing, and that in most parts of Finland CLIL has never become a part of mainstream education (Peltoniemi et al. 2018). Especially in lower and upper secondary education (grades 7–9 and 10–12, respectively) CLIL has not become well established to form a continuous transition from the primary school. Only 18% of the 310 municipalities in Finland providing basic education (primary and lower secondary schooling) offer some form of CLIL (Peltoniemi et al. 2018; Sjöberg et al. 2018). In upper secondary schools the proportion is even lower. The percentage above includes both extensive CLIL programmes, defined in the core curriculum as over 25% of the subject content taught in the target language (offered in 33 of the 310 municipalities), and language enrichment programmes with less than 25% of teaching in the target language (offered in 36 of the 310 municipalities) (EDUFI 2016; Peltoniemi et al. 2018; Sjöberg et al. 2018).

The target language of most of the language enrichment programmes throughout the municipalities of Finland is English. However, the majority of the well-established extensive implementations, called immersion education programmes, are offered in Swedish, one of the two national languages in Finland. These programmes are often situated in the Swedish/Finnish bilingual regions along the southern and western coast of Finland (Sjöberg et al. 2018). Excluding Swedish/Finnish early immersion, most of the extensive CLIL programmes have set requirements or an entrance exam to enrol the pupils. Thus, CLIL sometimes has a selective, even elitist reputation; this, however, has not been very widely discussed in public (but see Seppänen, Kosunen, and Rinne 2018).

## Attending to diversity in Finnish education

Educational cultures form an important backdrop for how diversity is addressed. In Finland, equality and equity are the cornerstones of education. As the Basic Education Act 628/1998 states in the objectives of education (Section 2):

[E]ducation shall promote civilisation and equality in society and pupils' prerequisites for participating in education and otherwise developing themselves during their lives.

And furthermore:

The aim of education shall further be to secure adequate equity in education throughout the country.

This means that all learners shall have an equal right and access to education regardless of the area they live in. In addition, gender equality is ensured by legislation and emphasised in the core curriculum. Equality refers to the same rights, opportunities, and resources for everyone. However, having the same goals, tasks and materials for all students will not support every one of them individually since their needs and strengths are different. To cater for this diversity, education must also guarantee equity by supporting individual students with varying, individually suitable resources. (<https://www.waterford.org/education/equity-vs-equality-in-education/>) This is also reflected in the core curriculum, which specifically mentions that '[e]quality does not mean that everyone is the same' (EDUFI 2016, Ch 4.2).

The current emphasis on equality is the result of a long-term trajectory of educational reforms in Finland. Firstly, the system based on segregated primary and grammar school pathways gave way to

comprehensive school in the 1970s. Its initial phases included an ability grouping system in language arts and mathematics which was, however, strongly critiqued for being socially unjust and was abolished in 1985 (Antikainen and Pitkänen 2014). Secondly, in the 2010s, funding reforms in basic education have guided towards more inclusive ways of organising teaching in comprehensive schools in Finland (Pulkkinen et al. 2020) and put emphasis on providing general support as the responsibility of all teachers (Okkolin et al. 2018). Today, to secure the participation of diverse learners in the Finnish basic education, a three-tiered support system for learning has been established. It consists of general support, intensified support, and special support (Thuneberg et al. 2013) to guarantee learners' individualised support by law. This may include individualised goals, tasks and materials for everyone who needs them. The first level of support (general support) should be available for anyone who needs temporary help with learning, regardless of the area or school of attendance. In section 16 of the Basic Education Act on remedial teaching and part-time special-needs education (Amendment 642/2010) it has been stated that:

[A] pupil who has temporarily fallen behind in studies or otherwise needs short-term support in learning shall be entitled to remedial teaching.

A pupil who has difficulties in learning or in school attendance shall be entitled to part-time special-needs education in connection with other instruction.

In the Principles that guide the development of the school culture, The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (EDUFI 2016) guarantees adequate support for every pupil:

The pupils have equal access to guidance and support for their development and learning, both as individuals and as group members. (EDUFI 2016, Chapter 4.2)

As educational support is the subjective right of every learner in the basic education, it also needs to be offered for the pupils in CLIL. In Chapter 10 of the core curriculum, concerning specifically bilingual education, the measures for support are stated again to highlight, as emphasised by Bergroth (2016), that also students in bilingual education are entitled to this right:

Under the Basic Education Act, the pupils are entitled to receive guidance counselling and adequate support for their learning and school attendance as soon as a need for it emerges. The pupil's need for support is monitored regularly, and support is provided as necessary. The aim is that the pupil receives methodical and continuous support as soon as a need for support emerges. The support for learning and school attendance is planned in cooperation between the teachers, the pupil and their guardian, and pupil welfare. (EDUFI 2016)

Despite these guidelines for educational support for students in CLIL, it has to be noted that children with special educational needs seldom get selected to weighted-curriculum education programmes that specialise in certain subjects, such as P.E., music or language, as in the case of CLIL (Seppänen, Kosunen, and Rinne 2018). An exception are immersion programmes in national languages that in most cases accept students with special education needs (Mård-Miettinen, Arnott, and Vignola 2021). Other types of CLIL programmes usually select students by aptitude tests (Peltoniemi et al. 2018). These tests vary, but mostly focus on the applicant's linguistic competence either in the school language or the target language or in both. The schools may also use adapted and non-standardised tests that measure general linguistic aptitude.

## Data and methods

### Research context

In the Finnish context of the ADiBE project, research was carried out in collaboration with two comprehensive schools in two cities, in different parts of Finland. Both schools provided CLIL teaching for grades 7–9, i.e. the lower secondary level of comprehensive school. School 1 has extensive experience of offering CLIL, in their case French, from the 1990s. Currently, they have one CLIL strand class at each grade level (grades 7–9). The CLIL classes receive part of their instruction in

mathematics, physics, chemistry, history and civics in French, the exact proportion varying. CLIL teaching is offered by subject teachers with Finnish as L1. In addition, there is a teacher with French as L1 participating in co-teaching with the teachers; this teacher has also taught the CLIL students at the primary level. Most of the students come from a primary school offering CLIL in French. School 2 has started its English-medium CLIL instruction in the 2010s. They also have a feeder CLIL primary school where most of the students come from. In this school, there are some Finnish as a second language learners who participate in the CLIL programme. School 2 also offers a part of instruction in certain subjects through CLIL, including home economics, arts, music, religion, chemistry, history, mathematics and PE. Apart from one L1 English speaker, a teacher who has also taught CLIL students at the primary level, teachers are subject teachers with Finnish as L1; upon availability, the school also houses CLIL language assistants (one assistant during the time of data collection).

### *Participants and data collection*

The data for this study consist of teacher and student interviews conducted in both schools, in total eleven teachers and a hundred students were interviewed (see [Table 1](#)). The interviews were voice-recorded, with informed consent obtained both from the teachers and the under-aged students' parents prior to the visit to school. The school administration, the participating teachers and the students' families were provided with information of the aims and scope of the ADiBE project. Depending on availability and their daily schedule, the teachers were interviewed either in small groups or individually. The students were interviewed in groups, usually dividing a class into two groups. The class sizes varied between 14 and 21 students and the size of the interview groups between 4 and 10 students. Altogether 48 students were interviewed in School 1, 52 in School 2.

All the interviews were conducted after the participants had already filled in the ADiBE questionnaire so they were familiar with the topic and the interviews were framed as an opportunity to discuss their perceptions in more detail. In line with the questionnaires, the interviews addressed topics such as participants' perceptions of diversity in CLIL, how it is addressed in teaching, assessment and materials, what kind of support strategies work best to support diverse learners in CLIL, and how the participants see the overall support system in their schools. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish apart from the teacher interview in School 2 where both Finnish and English were used.

### *Analysis*

The interviews were analysed with qualitative content analysis, focusing on themes and topics that the participants thematise in their discussions concerning different aspects of diversity ([Saldaña 2011](#)). We are interested both in themes that re-occur across the interviews and in the extent to which teacher and student perceptions either converge with or differ from each other.

The interviews were analysed in the following steps: (1) The interview data were transcribed; (2) The transcripts were read and reread independently by the three researchers and analysed inductively to identify recurrent themes and patterns in the data with regard to addressing diversity; (3) The independently identified patterns and themes relating to participant perceptions on addressing diversity were jointly discussed to reach agreement of the most salient ones; (4) Shared decision was made concerning the most illustrative examples of the themes; and (5) The examples from the interviews originally conducted in Finnish were translated into English.

**Table 1.** Number of participating teachers and students in the two schools.

	Number of interviewed teachers	Number of interviewed students
School 1	5	48
School 2	6	52
Total	11	100

## Findings

An overall finding arising from our interview data is that the topics raised by the teachers and the students largely centre around two main themes: the levels of recognition and topicalisation of student diversity, and the means of responding to this diversity. As will be shown below, the topics re-occurring within these main themes and across the interviews suggest a tension between equality, understood as an overarching 'same for all' principle with regard to teaching, materials, tasks and tests, and the need to support equity by attuning to differences in learners and their ways of learning.

### *Degrees of acknowledging diversity*

Discussing student diversity with the teachers and students made apparent that there was both diversity readily acknowledged by them and diversity that was not topicalised or talked about as diversity. In the following, we will first focus on students' linguistic diversity that appeared to be the more visible type of diversity for the participants and then proceed to show how they approach content-related academic diversity.

### *The perceived heterogeneity in CLIL students' language skills*

In the interviews, both the teachers and the students readily recognised students' linguistic diversity. This was seen as a challenge for teaching and learning, as the following extract from a teacher interview shows (in the extracts, commas are used for readability to mark utterance boundaries, three full stops in square brackets to indicate where extract has been shortened, and text in square brackets to indicate authors' comments).

(1)

well I think one of the natural challenges is that [...] inside in some lessons you have students who di-disregarding other abilities, some students who are naturally talented at language are naturally talented at English, and those students are automatically, at a better advantage than student who just wants to be in the CLIL group and tries really hard [...] who's just not naturally talented at the language

Observations on students' heterogenous language skills did not only concern the CLIL language, English or French, but also Finnish. CLIL groups were reported to include L1 speakers of both Finnish and the target language and, in addition, there were learners with multilingual backgrounds for whom neither the target language nor Finnish was their L1. Thus, the teachers pointed out that they had CLIL students who struggle with Finnish and others who struggle with the CLIL target language, and some students who have difficulties with both languages. Such linguistic heterogeneity in CLIL classrooms is an issue that has received relatively little attention in research (but see Cenoz 2017; Cenoz and Gorter 2019).

The area where linguistic diversity and its impacts were especially recognised as equity issues was testing and assessment. Notably, it was the diversity in the students' *Finnish* language skills that allowed giving individualised tests to the multilingual learners with no or little knowledge of Finnish (learners of Finnish as a second language) in the lessons taught through Finnish. However, the same did not apply to the tests in the target CLIL language, which were the same for all despite the recognised variation in students' language skills.

(2)

I: one thing that we were interested in was if homework, for example tests are differentiated according to the ability level [...]

T: not in this group but sure for example in the Finnish lessons I have to differentiate, so that of course FSL students meaning the immigrant students, well they have very different grounds for assessment, so of course they are assessed in a totally different way, and sometimes depending on the students' level, if the student has just arrived in Finland then you have to give him/her a different test

As regards students' views, those with Finnish as L1 found that studying through the CLIL language influences their learning. They were also concerned about teachers not taking into account in assessment that they are studying in a non-native language. As shown below, when talking about tests in CLIL language, some students even found that in some subjects the assessment criteria are higher in CLIL, maintaining that they would have gained better grades with the same performance in a mainstream programme than they did in CLIL, which, of course, is an equality issue across the programmes.

(3)

sometimes you just feel that to be able to get grade eight or nine you have to be at the level of ten plus [ten is the highest grade] in a mainstream class because everybody's at like a high level [...] like in the other classes [...] for our friends [the others] it was much easier to get good grades

On the other hand, the teachers and the students emphasised that the criteria used in the final assessment is and should be the same for all learners in both CLIL and the mainstream programmes. This shows clearly in these extracts from both schools, the first by a Physics teacher and the second by a Geography teacher.

(4)

I: *so do you take this diversity into account in any way in assessment*

T: *I have not taken [that into account] in my view if I give a final grade in physics then it is a final grade in physics, and in maths final grade is a maths final grade*

(5)

I: *can you implement assessment so that it takes into account differences in students' skill levels*

T: *you mean linguistic skills or*

I: *yea-actually both linguistic and academic*

T: *we have final assessment criteria, we cannot take the skill level into account [...] everybody has the same criteria for final assessment*

Taking linguistic diversity into account in assessment practices to support student equity, then, seems to concern only migrant background students who have difficulties in mastering Finnish, whereas there is a preference to not take linguistic diversity into account in the CLIL target language in the name of equality, that is securing the same assessment criteria for all. This may be teachers' response to the section on CLIL in the core curriculum where it is explicitly articulated that *Assessment in different subjects adheres to the general grounds for assessment in basic education, regardless of the language in which those subjects have been taught* (EDUFI 2016). For students with migrant backgrounds, on the other hand, the section of the core curriculum covering the subject Finnish as a Second Language allows for different assessment practices than for students with Finnish as the first language (EDUFI 2016).

### ***The perceived homogeneity in CLIL students' academic skills***

While students' linguistic diversity was quite readily acknowledged, the teacher interviews communicate quite strongly an overall ethos of there being no or only little diversity in CLIL students' academic skills. This is illustrated by the following extract.

(6)

there is no one who would be exceptionally better or exceptionally ahead of others or exceptionally weaker, so it's kind of an even crowd

Such sentiments of homogeneity were particularly clear in School 1 with a long-term French-medium CLIL programme. In this school, the teachers tended to compare CLIL students to mainstream students and consider the former as a selected group of skilful and motivated learners with supportive parents. In the more recently established English-medium CLIL programme in School 2, there was more heterogeneity in the student groups, teachers pointing out that this diversity often results from the late enrolment of students with non-English or non-Finnish linguistic



backgrounds. CLIL classrooms in this school were thus used as a route for Finnish-as-a-second language learners to enter Finnish education, a practice that the CLIL teachers criticised. However, also in this school, CLIL students were, overall, considered to be less in need of academic support.

Although CLIL students' academic level was considered high, the teachers pointed out that if necessary, CLIL students are entitled to similar support as the mainstream students, which is also their right according to the educational legislation and the core curriculum. However, according to both the teachers and the students, CLIL students very seldomly take part in remedial teaching or special education. They were rather portrayed as a selected group and their needs for support as minor in comparison to students in the more heterogenous mainstream classes. This view was also reflected in the CLIL students not always being familiar with the support system in their school. In addition, the schools' limited special education resources may have affected CLIL students rarely receiving extra help, which becomes apparent in the following teacher interview excerpt.

(7)

when there are so many of those [in the school] who would participate [in special education] so that those who have the lowest grades that's quite a few, the students in CLIL classes are usually not so weak since they have been selected, to some extent

Perhaps due to this overall view of rather little diversity among CLIL students in academic skills, the teachers emphasised treating all students in the same way in order not to draw attention to possible differences. Teacher responses even included some very strong expressions of reluctance towards noticeable differentiation such as: *I don't want that gap appearing in my classrooms.*

As regards students, they also readily brought up their experiences of everybody being taught in the same way despite their possible differences, as shown in this quote.

(8)

I: *do you feel that in this bilingual teaching it has been taken into account that you are different as learners [...]*  
S: *not really, like teaching is always y'know at the same level*

However, students also voiced some more critical views on everybody being taught in the same way, recognising its potential to cause problems of understanding. As the following extract from a response to interviewer's question on how learners' diversity is taken into account in teaching indicates, this applies in students' view to both CLIL and L1 medium teaching.

(9)

S1 *actually it's not taken into account at all or paid attention to like*  
S2 *adapting to level of learners*  
S1 *not in French medium or in Finnish medium, nothing*  
I: *quite, do you have a special needs teacher then who can help*  
Ss: *no not really*  
S: *it would be kind of nice if we had in some, cos- then it'd be like those students who do not understand then they'd understand*

The discourse concerning lack of great diversity in academic skills was also visible in both teachers and students bringing out without hesitation, that rather than being differentiated, teaching materials, tasks, homework, and assessment are the same for everybody, except for those with Finnish as L2. This echoes the equality-over-equity ethos mentioned before. Some students verbalised quite explicitly that tasks and materials are the same for all, for example by pointing out that *we have never had teaching material differentiated by the skill level.* However, when asked to elaborate the issue of student homogeneity in more detail, some students admitted that academic diversity might be greater and more common than the teachers think.

(10)

and then again at times it feels that it is assumed that everybody is at the same [level] with the others, and those who are not necessarily at such a high level they are ignored and [teaching] just adjusts to the level of the best, and this in a way leads to the weaker ones having more difficulties

The students recognised that some of them were either slow or fast learners and confided that it was difficult for some of them to learn the content in some subjects. Students were also expressing a wish that the teachers would more often see them as individuals who learn in different ways, not as a homogenous group of skilful and autonomous learners.

In addition, students indicated another equity issue by pointing out that CLIL groups may include students who need to work extremely hard for their grades, but this is something that, according to them, teachers are not aware of. As shown below, some students also commented on the high expectations placed on them sometimes even making them reluctant to ask for help in order to avoid being labelled as 'losers'.

(11)

somehow the situation is made so stressful, like everyone should know, that I feel that everyone else knows and I'm the only one who doesn't, so somehow I don't dare to ask [inhales in a scared manner], like somehow, I don't know

This made students feel that there is something wrong in not understanding and therefore they called for a teaching atmosphere in CLIL where all would feel welcome to ask questions. As the following quote shows, students were quite perceptive of the process whereby higher expectations and assessment criteria in CLIL classrooms, in an unfair manner, raise the bar for those who are not doing that well and who end up just adapting to the situation.

(12)

like when a big proportion get a good grade from a test then in a way the next test is going to be even more difficult cos it's thought that this is such a high level class let's do it like this, and then those few who may not know stuff that well they then just have to adapt to the situation

Despite the teachers' overall view of CLIL groups as academically rather homogenous, they also brought up student heterogeneity. However, in notable contrast to the students highlighting the difficulties experienced by those who struggle with learning, teachers' remarks on the need to differentiate were targeted to upwards differentiation to provide adequate academic challenge for the most skilful students in CLIL groups. This is shown in the following quote.

(13)

you have to consider how you can try to satisfy all students so that those who are the most advanced won't get bored, meaning that you'll offer something more challenging for them and try to create situations where everyone can approximately finish the same tasks at an appropriate level

In sum, the selectivity associated with CLIL programmes seems to produce a kind of halo effect, which may fade out and hide differences between students. As shown above, the assumption of all CLIL students being at an equally high level may result in teachers ignoring those with lower skills who experience more difficulties. At the same time, the interviews indicate that students are aware of learning differences but do not see it as an option to voice this to bring about change in teaching. Consequently, the high expectations clashing with classroom realities may result in a situation where students' diversity is not acknowledged, which, in turn, may increase rather than level out learning-related differences between them.

### ***Classroom practices attending to individual learning needs***

Despite the overall emphasis on treating all students equally, the data also reveal many instances where both the teachers and the students talk about classroom practices and strategies that cater for different learning needs. Thus, there *is* attention to diversity in CLIL classrooms even if the participants do not necessarily frame it in those terms and not as CLIL-specific. The findings also reveal some tensions between teachers' and students' perceptions on the success of classroom practices for the needs of diverse learners.

### ***Matters of grouping***

One of the strategies to support diverse learners brought up by the teachers relates to how students are grouped during classroom work. As pointed out above, the teachers are reluctant to underline learner differences in CLIL and this also shows in avoiding grouping based on different academic skill levels: *I tend not to put kids of the same abilities together because I don't want that gap appearing in my classroom.* This is well in line with the removal of general ability grouping and the ideology of inclusive education in Finnish education discussed earlier.

The interviews indicate that grouping in CLIL classrooms mostly happens by students' own choice or is randomised through lottery. When teachers form groups, they mostly target mixed-ability groups as a way to foster opportunities for peer-support. Interestingly, and in line with the discussion above about the readiness to talk about linguistic rather than academic diversity, this support tends to be verbalised from the viewpoint of linguistic rather than academic diversity, as exemplified by the following quote from a language teacher interview.

(14)

I put a native speaker together with somebody who needs more practice [...] I make use of the fact that there are students at different levels, and then in this way I try to make them teach each other

As regards students, teachers' strategy for mixed-ability groups was not always visible to them as their most common perception was that they are mostly free to choose groups they want to work in, or it happens through lottery. Students' reflections also revealed tensions regarding the very idea of ability level groupings: they did realise its potential benefit for learning, but another side of the coin was unequal distribution of work, with those who are more skilled perhaps ending up doing everything. The data also reveal students' negative perceptions of ability-level groupings from social and emotional perspectives as this kind of categorisation makes ability differences visible for others.

(15)

it didn't feel good when we were separated [...] if you don't want the others to know what your skills are it became very clear at that point

This means that highlighting ability levels in classrooms feels uncomfortable even though, as pointed out above, students are well aware of ability level differences in CLIL.

### ***Individualised support in classroom practices***

Individualised support is one strategy to address diversity and enhance student equality and this was a topic raised in both teacher and student interviews. The overall sentiment among teachers was that big classrooms make it difficult to provide individualised support. However, what emerged as a rather common strategy to enhance student equality was providing individualised support during groupwork, i.e. teachers monitoring students' work and being alert to what kind of support is needed. As the following teacher comment shows, such support can be subtly geared to securing that differences in students' linguistic skills do not form a barrier to learning and working in groups.

(16)

T: *as you saw I was helping them and with somebody I talked in English and we discussed about reasons and everything, and with some groups I talked in Finnish, so it depends*

I: *so that is adjusting to their abilities*

T: *yes*

Teachers also reported attending to students' different paces of working. It is notable that rather than seeing this as CLIL-specific, the teachers commented on it being something that applies to all teaching.

(17)

I: *how is it in your content teaching, do these different skill levels show [...]*

T: *actually it's not probably about CLIL teaching, like it's more of what shows in teaching more generally [...] when students master things in different ways then you take that into account, so I don't think language adds anything more to the matter*

Teachers also brought up individual support in connection with tests and assessment in that some teachers have developed practices for individualised feedback even when the criteria for assessment remain the same, as was discussed earlier. In some subjects, e.g. arts and home economics, feedback is seen as such a natural and inherent part of teaching that it is taken into account constantly. In some other subjects, however, the teachers maintain that it remains the task for the students themselves to ask for individualised feedback as it is not automatised in the teaching process.

As was discussed above, catering for equity by taking diversity into account in tests only concerned migrant background students. This often involves a great deal of individualised support for students as the quote below shows, also highlighting how lack of human resources can easily threaten possibilities for support.

(18)

I often arrange for them [Finnish as L2 learners] a separate occasion to do their tests and they can be accompanied by a teacher who helps with the language, but this is also where we now have scant resources [...] I mean it's not resourced into anyone's working hours to supervise test situations of the foreign background students in our CLIL-classrooms

Students' views on individualised support differ somewhat from those of the teachers. Their most common reaction was that there is not much that kind of support: *at least not so that a teacher would have one-to-one discussion with you*. Even though some students recognised teachers 'circling in the class' and asking if anyone needs help as targeted feedback, the more general view was that support tends to be directed to the whole group rather than individuals. A problem with this, as noted by a student, is that *when roughly the same [feedback] is given to the whole group it's like well, what of this now concerns me*. Generalised feedback thus does not necessarily make it clear what individual students should do differently to improve. This again reflects the preference of attending to equality in the sense of the same provision for all rather than equity in the sense of providing feedback differentiated by student needs.

### ***Individualised support through homework***

The amount and type of homework is another means to provide individualised support in CLIL. The teachers realised this by, for example, not requiring that all students do the more advanced tasks. Instead, they assign the basic tasks for all while the more advanced tasks are offered as an individual (bonus) choice that the students can choose according to their skills or interests.

(19)

I always give as homework the kind of, what I think are the most important basic level tasks and then students can individually do other tasks they want and get a circled plus marking for that, so that you'll get a plus if the

homework is done and a circled plus if you do extra tasks, those can be chosen according to your own interest or skill level

Teachers also explicitly refer to tasks in textbooks as already differentiated, starting from the more basic ones and moving toward more applied ones. For this reason, they seem to perceive no need for other type of differentiation when giving homework.

(20)

the level of difficulty [in textbook tasks] varies to begin with, so if I give them seven tasks as homework the first one may be ridiculously easy, already adapted into that direction, the last one may be more applied so adapted into the other direction, so I see no sense in me separately saying that you three do these first three [tasks] and you four do these four last ones, and- as I don't want to make in the classroom at least any big deal of it if there are different level students

From the teachers' side, this can be seen as an indication of trust in textbooks and materials in guiding teaching and in 'textbooks as the curriculum'. Such differentiation based on students completing textbook tasks according to their skill levels may also offer a more subtle approach to differentiation than making student differences explicit in classrooms. In the extract above, this is indicated by the teacher pointing out that she does not want to make 'any big deal' of the students' different levels.

The students align with teachers' views in maintaining that individual support does not happen through homework: the most common reaction to a question on differentiated homework was denying it and saying homework is the same for all. In the words of one student: *the quantity may vary [referring to different subjects and times of giving homework] but homework is always the same*. As regards teaching materials more generally, students report on upwards rather than downwards differentiation in the use of materials as illustrated by this response to a question on whether different levels of learners are taken into account in teaching materials: *well towards downwards direction not taken into account but if some students are better then there will simply be more tasks*.

Homework as a differentiation strategy thus involves student agency in the form of choice: giving the same core tasks for everybody leaves an option for students to decide which ones to complete (see Roiha 2014 for similar observations). However, such differentiation by choice seems to work upwards rather than downwards since all students were expected to finish the same core tasks. This, again, is a sign of fostering equality rather than attuning to equity where differentiation downwards with individualised support would also be an option.

## Discussion and conclusions

The findings show that a recurrent theme across the interviews with Finnish CLIL teachers and students was the importance accorded to *equality*, that all students should be offered the same teaching, tasks and homework, and be assessed according to the same criteria. This can be strongly connected to the educational system and educational culture in Finland, its overarching ethos of equality being clearly familiar discourse to the participants. Moreover, teachers in particular were well aware of the ideal of inclusive education and, perhaps therefore, did not readily topicalise student diversity, at least not in terms of practises of overt differentiation that would highlight differences between students. This does not mean teachers not recognising different student needs; they rather attune to those as an inherent part of their pedagogical work. Furthermore, the three-tiered support system outlined in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education describes it as the task for every teacher to provide general support for all students, which may contribute to these teacher preferences. The only occasions where explicit differentiation strategies were mentioned concerned migrant background CLIL students with Finnish as the second language – and their support was linked to Finnish medium rather than CLIL teaching. It may be that the option of

school subject *Finnish as a second language and literature* for migrant background students, instead of *Mother tongue and literature: Finnish or Swedish*, and the curricular guidance on how to support these learners, provides legitimacy to differentiation. The same does not seem to apply to CLIL where the core curriculum explicates that its content learning goals are the same as in the regular classes.

Another likely reason for teachers not topicalising differentiation is the perceived homogeneity of CLIL groups. On the whole, CLIL classes are seen as consisting of well-achieving students that differ from the more heterogeneous mainstream classrooms in there being less need for special education. This, no doubt, is influenced by the fact that CLIL students undergo a selection process. The idea of CLIL students as high-achievers is also reflected in the observation that when teachers did topicalise differentiation among CLIL students, their concerns were for upwards differentiation and securing the most high-achieving students' motivation. Also the students were well aware of and discursively constructing the speciality of their groups. Being a CLIL student, then, acts as differentiation from others and offers students a sense of pride and prestige. The other side of the coin is that this exceptionality also builds a sense of having to manage independently and a feeling that it is difficult to reveal problems in understanding, something that the students found stressful. There thus seem to be expectations among teachers and students that homogenise natural student diversity towards an ideal CLIL student who is smart, independent and has good self-regulation skills.

The findings suggest that the ethos of equality combined with the perceived higher level of students may hide *equity* issues in CLIL classrooms and the fact that also CLIL groups consist of individuals with diverse needs and different learning styles. Despite their unwillingness to be grouped according to ability levels, the students called for attention to differences between them by voicing wishes for teachers to be aware of their individual needs and to be treated as individuals whose learning may proceed at different paces rather than handling them as a homogeneous group. Teachers, for their part, reported about strategies of individualised support for example in group work situations. Even though students noticed that teachers were attending to different groups they did not, however, recognise this as sufficient individual support. That students did not readily notice teachers catering to individual students' needs by helping them when the need arises may also attest to teachers' preference for supporting learners without 'making too big deal of it', as one of the teachers put it. Just as teachers' feedback in the (CLIL) classroom is often not recognised as assessment (see Leontjev, Jakonen, and Skinnari 2020), naturally occurring emergent support may not be understood as differentiation, which, by definition, is pre-planned, documented and organised according to the three-tiered support system in Finnish education.

Student interviews also revealed some viewpoints on catering to diversity in CLIL absent from teacher interviews. For example, the students reported on the generally perceived high quality of CLIL classrooms as an equality issue, feeling that different criteria for success apply in CLIL classrooms so that the same level of performance would be evaluated as better and would earn them better grades in a regular classroom. Overall, however, the interviews point towards down-to-earth attitude among students: they are aware of different learning paces and styles, and would welcome more individualised feedback and support, yet concede to the reality where 'some just learn the same content better than others'.

This study contributes to the ongoing research on issues of equity and diversity in CLIL and other forms of bilingual education. Recently, such research has addressed issues such as inequities associated with streaming into different strands according to linguistic competence (Fernández-Agüero and Hidalgo-McCabe 2020) and has raised concerns about the inclusion of students with learning exceptionalities and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Genesee and Tedick 2021; Mård-Miettinen, Arnott, and Vignola 2021). This study has shown that issues of diversity and equity are present also in CLIL groups which, at the outset, are considered as homogeneous and well-performing by both teachers and students. The student interviews

were particularly illuminating with respect to tensions embedded in CLIL whereby students felt restricted in their opportunities to express the need for individualised support in the face of the prevailing assumption of them as homogenous group of skilful learners. A fruitful avenue for further research, then, would be to dig deeper into how students perceive the possibilities and constraints of CLIL for their learning. Ultimately, such knowledge of student perceptions could be helpful for CLIL schools to develop their practices so that both equality and equity become fostered.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by European Commission [grant number 2018-1-ES01-KA201-050356].

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