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Innovative strategies for engaging high school students in mixed-level english classrooms

Estrategias innovadoras para fomentar la participación de estudiantes de educación secundaria en aulas de inglés con diferentes niveles de competencia lingüística

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ISSN: 3091-1672

Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

RESUMEN

La enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en aulas con diferentes niveles de dominio lingüístico presenta desafíos relacionados con la participación, la confianza y las necesidades de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo determinar estrategias innovadoras que favorezcan el engagement de estudiantes de secundaria en aulas de inglés con distintos niveles de competencia lingüística, a partir de sus experiencias y percepciones. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo mediante un estudio de caso desarrollado en una institución educativa fiscomisional de Santa Elena, Ecuador. La información se recopiló mediante cinco grupos focales con estudiantes de segundo de Bachillerato General Unificado y entrevistas semiestructuradas con dos docentes de inglés. Los datos se analizaron mediante análisis temático. Los resultados evidenciaron diferencias en el dominio lingüístico, la confianza para participar oralmente, las dificultades de aprendizaje y las preferencias por actividades interactivas, colaborativas y creativas. A partir de estos hallazgos, se propusieron cinco estrategias contextualizadas: tareas comunicativas diferenciadas, actividades orales con apoyo progresivo, aprendizaje colaborativo con roles definidos, juegos interactivos de vocabulario e idioma y proyectos creativos de producción lingüística. Se concluye que estas propuestas responden a las necesidades identificadas en las aulas multinivel y ofrecen alternativas pedagógicas para favorecer la participación estudiantil, aunque su efectividad no fue evaluada en esta investigación.

Palabras clave: estrategias innovadoras; participación estudiantil; enseñanza del inglés; aulas multinivel; instrucción diferenciada.

ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a Foreign Language in mixed-level classrooms presents challenges related to student engagement, confidence, and diverse learning needs. This study aimed to determine innovative teaching strategies that could foster high school students' engagement in mixed-level English classrooms by examining their experiences and perceptions. A qualitative approach was employed through a case study conducted at a state-funded, nonprofit-operated high school in Santa Elena, Ecuador. Data were collected through five focus groups with second-year high school students and semi-structured interviews with two English teachers. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed differences in English proficiency, confidence in oral participation, learning difficulties, and preferences for interactive, collaborative, and creative activities. Based on these findings, five contextualized teaching strategies were proposed: differentiated communicative tasks, scaffolded speaking activities, role-based collaborative learning, interactive vocabulary and language games, and creative language production projects. The study concludes that these proposals respond to the needs identified in mixed-level classrooms and offer pedagogical alternatives aimed at encouraging student engagement, although their effectiveness was not evaluated in the present research.

Keywords: innovative teaching strategies; student engagement; English language teaching; mixed-level classrooms; differentiated instruction.

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ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the secondary level can be challenging when students with different language abilities and learning experiences share the same classroom. Some learners may feel comfortable participating in English activities, while others need additional explanations, practice, or support to become involved. These differences require teachers to consider how classroom activities can accommodate students' needs without limiting their opportunities to participate. In this context, exploring innovative teaching strategies becomes relevant to creating more inclusive and engaging English learning experiences.

Innovation in EFL should not be understood exclusively as the incorporation of digital technologies. Innovative pedagogical practices may include cooperative learning, task-based language teaching, project-based learning, differentiated instruction, problem solving, critical thinking, and technology-supported activities. These approaches broaden the possibilities available to teachers when attempting to respond to learner diversity and classroom needs (Lakew et al., 2025).

However, introducing new teaching strategies does not necessarily mean that they will work equally well in every classroom. Their suitability may depend on several conditions, including students' characteristics, teachers' preparation, available resources, and the educational environment. Institutional, cultural, and methodological factors can also influence how these practices are introduced. Research in secondary EFL education has identified barriers that teachers may encounter when implementing curricular and pedagogical innovations (Khodamoradi, 2024).

Student engagement is an important aspect of understanding how learners become involved in classroom activities. It is not limited to whether students participate visibly, as it also involves their interest, emotions, and effort during the learning process. Engagement has been described through three interconnected dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004). In language learning, a social dimension is also recognized, since interaction with classmates and participation in shared tasks form part of students' engagement experiences (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Considering these dimensions helps explain why students may respond differently to the same English lesson.

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ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

Recent literature has examined several factors associated with engagement among high school EFL learners. The learning environment, instructional content, teacher–student interaction, motivation, and different forms of internal and external support have been identified as relevant aspects of students' engagement experiences. Research has also examined the relationship between engagement and burnout, demonstrating that students may experience classroom learning differently depending on the academic and interpersonal conditions surrounding them (Wang et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024).

Other studies emphasize the importance of the characteristics of English lessons themselves. Relevance, active and social learning methods, and teacher–student relationships have been associated with students' engagement in upper-secondary English education (Skarpaas, 2024). Similarly, teaching strategies, students' proficiency, classroom climate, and teaching style have been identified as factors related to behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement in high school English learning (Yang & Liu, 2024).

The studies discussed above indicate that student engagement is shaped by more than individual motivation or willingness to participate. Classroom relationships, teaching practices, learning activities, and the support students receive can influence how they experience English lessons. For this reason, understanding participation requires looking at what happens within the classroom and listening to students' perspectives. This becomes especially relevant in mixed-level classes, where learners may respond differently to the same activity because of their language abilities, confidence, and learning needs.

Mixed-level English classrooms bring together students who may differ in language proficiency, previous learning experiences, interests, and readiness to complete classroom tasks. Teaching these groups requires attention to different learning needs within the same lesson. Practices such as flexible grouping, peer support, and scaffolding can help teachers respond to this diversity. However, providing differentiated support is not always straightforward, particularly when teachers must manage large classes, limited instructional time, insufficient resources, or gaps in professional preparation (Bhandari et al., 2025).

Similar findings emerge from qualitative research focused specifically on teachers' experiences in mixed-ability classrooms. Teachers have reported challenges related to differentiation, classroom management, and equitable assessment, while also describing learner-centered strategies intended to address heterogeneous groups (Samira et al.,

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

2025). Other qualitative evidence highlights teachers' perceptions of the barriers involved in teaching students with diverse abilities, reinforcing the complexity of meeting different learning needs within a single English classroom (Rayamajhi, 2025).

Differentiated instruction is therefore particularly relevant to the discussion of mixed-level EFL education. Differentiation may involve adjusting content, learning processes, and expected products according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Previous research has also shown differences between teachers' and learners' perceptions and preferences regarding differentiated practices, indicating that pedagogical decisions should consider the perspectives of the people directly involved in the learning process (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021).

Research focusing on students' perspectives provides another relevant contribution. Secondary-school learners have reported perceptions of digital learning resources in terms of interactivity, flexibility, motivation, and their capacity to support engagement (Majid et al., 2025). In another secondary EFL context, students demonstrated generally positive attitudes toward the use of ICT, although differences in teachers' technological competencies were also observed (Farisa et al., 2023). These studies illustrate the importance of considering student voices when examining innovative classroom practices.

The issue has particular relevance in Ecuador. A research synthesis focused on teaching English in mixed-level rural classrooms identified diversity in students' abilities, backgrounds, interests, and needs as challenges requiring appropriate pedagogical responses (Tillaguango-Pintado & Argudo-Serrano, 2024). Although this work does not constitute an empirical study with its own participant sample, it provides important national evidence connecting mixed-level English teaching with the need to respond to learner heterogeneity.

Ecuadorian research has also shown the usefulness of examining EFL education from participants' perspectives. Through a focus-group interview with EFL teachers, previous research explored favorable and critical perceptions regarding the content and curricular use of pedagogical materials in Ecuadorian schools and high schools (Alvarez Llerena & Guevara Torres, 2021). Such evidence supports the relevance of investigating educational practices through the experiences and perspectives of those directly involved in the classroom.

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

The studies reviewed provide useful insights into innovative EFL teaching practices, student engagement, and the challenges of mixed-ability classrooms. However, these topics are often addressed separately. Some researchers examine the factors associated with students' engagement, while others focus on teaching strategies or the difficulties teachers experience when working with learners at different proficiency levels. Fewer connections are made among these areas within a single secondary-school context, particularly when both students' and teachers' perspectives are considered. Exploring these experiences together may provide a clearer understanding of the needs that should guide the development of teaching strategies for mixed-level English classrooms.

The present study addresses the need to understand how differences in English proficiency, learning difficulties, and classroom experiences relate to students' engagement in mixed-level English classes. Rather than introducing a teaching strategy and measuring its effects, the research focuses on understanding what students and teachers experience in their everyday classroom environment. Their perspectives provide a starting point for identifying teaching alternatives that respond to the specific needs of these groups, instead of assuming that the same activities will be equally suitable for every student.

The study was conducted at a fiscomisional high school (a state-funded or partially state-funded institution operated by a nonprofit organization) in Santa Elena, Ecuador, and focused on second-year BGU students from mixed-level English classes and two English teachers from the same institution.

Exploring their perspectives can contribute to a contextualized understanding of the difficulties and needs associated with engagement in heterogeneous English classrooms. The information obtained from participants provided a contextualized basis for identifying pedagogical strategies responsive to the challenges and needs identified in the study.

Accordingly, the general objective of this research is to determine innovative teaching strategies that can foster high school students' engagement in mixed-level English classrooms by examining students' and English teachers' perceptions, experiences, and learning needs. The study specifically seeks to identify students' main learning difficulties and needs, analyze students' and English teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding engagement, participation, learning needs, and current teaching practices, and design a contextualized set of innovative teaching strategies based on the needs and challenges identified.

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

In accordance with this purpose, the study is guided by the following general research question: What innovative teaching strategies can be proposed to foster high school students' engagement in mixed-level English classrooms based on students' and English teachers' experiences and needs? This question maintains the exploratory character of the research and ensures consistency with the qualitative design, since the strategies will be proposed on the basis of the experiences and needs identified rather than experimentally implemented and evaluated.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study used a qualitative approach to explore how students and English teachers experience learning and teaching in mixed-level classrooms. Particular attention was given to differences in language proficiency, students' confidence and participation, learning difficulties, and the support provided during English lessons. Qualitative research allows educational experiences to be examined through the perspectives of those directly involved (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). This approach was appropriate for the present study because the purpose was to understand participants' experiences and identify their needs, rather than measure the effects of a teaching intervention.

The research was developed as a qualitative case study at a fiscomisional high school in Santa Elena, Ecuador. It focused on the experiences of second-year Bachillerato General Unificado (BGU) students from five parallel classes and two English teachers from the same institution. Examining this particular educational setting made it possible to explore how differences in English proficiency, classroom participation, and instructional practices were experienced within the school. The information gathered also served as a basis for proposing teaching strategies that addressed the needs identified by the participants.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a fiscomisional high school located in Santa Elena, Ecuador. The research context comprised five parallel classes (A, B, C, D, and E) of the second year of Bachillerato General Unificado (BGU), with approximately 45 students enrolled in each class. Consequently, the student population associated with the study consisted of approximately 225 learners.

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

A purposive sampling procedure was used to select students with different classroom experiences, levels of participation, confidence, learning needs, and perceived English proficiency. A total of 30 students participated in five focus groups, with six students selected from each parallel class (A, B, C, D, and E). The selection aimed to include diverse student perspectives rather than focusing exclusively on learners with higher proficiency or more frequent classroom participation.

Additionally, two English teachers from the same educational institution participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Their participation provided complementary perspectives on students' English proficiency, engagement, learning difficulties, classroom participation, and instructional practices in mixed-level English classrooms.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Two qualitative data collection techniques were employed: focus groups with students and semi-structured interviews with English teachers. Both techniques provided information about student engagement, learning difficulties, differences in English proficiency, classroom participation, teaching practices, and perceived learning needs. The use of these two sources allowed students' experiences to be examined alongside teachers' perspectives, facilitating the identification of common patterns and differences within mixed-level English classrooms.

The student focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured guide composed of 12 open-ended questions. The guide encouraged participants to describe their classroom experiences in their own words and interact with the perspectives expressed by other members of the group. The questions addressed students' experiences learning English, difficulties, confidence, participation, differences in proficiency, classroom activities, collaborative work, teacher support, and possible strategies for improving engagement.

The semi-structured instruments were developed through an integrative adaptation of thematic domains examined in previous empirical research. The student focus-group guide was informed by Purnamaningwulan and Purwanto (2025), whose study addressed differentiated instruction and students' perceptions in a mixed-proficiency EFL classroom. Questions related to student engagement were conceptually informed by Philp and Duchesne (2016), who examined cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional engagement in language-learning tasks, and by Yang and Liu (2024), who investigated students'

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

engagement in English learning and its influencing factors. Additional areas concerning classroom activities, teacher support, and learning experiences were informed by Skarpaas (2024), who explored factors associated with engagement in upper-secondary English education.

Table 1

Student Focus Group Guide

No.	Question	Area explored
1	How would you describe your experience learning English in your current class?	General learning experience
2	What aspects of learning English are easier for you, and which aspects are more difficult?	Difficulties and learning needs
3	How do you usually feel when you have to participate or speak English during class?	Confidence and emotional engagement
4	What kinds of activities make you want to participate more in English class? Why?	Behavioral engagement
5	What situations make you participate less or avoid participating in English class?	Barriers to participation
6	Do you notice differences in English proficiency among students in your class? How do these differences affect the way you learn or participate?	Mixed proficiency
7	Which English class activities help you learn and participate the most? Why?	Engaging classroom practices
8	Which activities are more difficult, less interesting, or less useful for you? Why?	Low-engagement activities
9	How do you feel about working with classmates who have different levels of English? What helps or makes this difficult?	Collaborative learning
10	Do you feel that the same classroom activity is equally easy or difficult for all students? Why or why not?	Learner diversity and differentiation
11	What kind of support from the teacher helps you participate or understand English activities better?	Teacher support
12	What changes, activities, or strategies would help students with different English levels participate and learn more actively?	Needs and strategy development

Note. Questions were developed based on thematic areas examined by Purnamaningwulan and Purwanto (2025), Philp and Duchesne (2016), Yang and Liu (2024), and Skarpaas (2024).

Two English teachers from the same educational institution participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored the teachers' perceptions of proficiency differences, students' learning difficulties, participation patterns, engagement, current teaching practices, differentiated instruction, classroom constraints, and possible strategies for responding to mixed-level groups.

The teacher interview guide was informed by the thematic domains examined by Kótay-Nagy (2023), who conducted an interview study on EFL teachers' views and self-reported differentiated practices, and Bhandari et al. (2025), who investigated differentiated instruction practices in mixed-ability English classrooms. These studies provided support for examining teacher perceptions, instructional challenges, differentiated practices, and responses to learner diversity.

Table 2

Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Guide

No.	Question	Area explored
1	How would you describe the differences in English proficiency among students in the five parallel classes?	Learner diversity
2	What learning difficulties or needs do you observe most frequently among students with different English proficiency levels?	Learning needs
3	How do differences in English proficiency influence students' participation and engagement during English lessons?	Mixed proficiency and engagement
4	Which students tend to participate more or less, and what factors do you think influence those differences?	Participation patterns
5	What challenges do you experience when teaching students with different proficiency levels in the same classroom?	Teaching challenges
6	How do you currently adapt content, activities, instructions, grouping, or support to respond to students' different levels and needs?	Differentiated practices
7	Which differentiated practices are easier to implement in your context, and which are more difficult? Why?	Feasibility and constraints
8	Which classroom activities currently generate the highest levels of student participation or engagement?	Effective classroom practices
9	Which activities appear to generate lower levels of participation or engagement? What do you think explains this?	Low-engagement practices

10	How does group or pair work function when students have different levels of English?	Collaborative learning
11	What contextual factors make it difficult to respond to all students' learning needs in the same lesson?	Practical barriers
12	What teaching strategies do you believe could better support the engagement of students with different English proficiency levels in these classes?	Strategy development

Note. Questions were developed based on thematic areas examined by Kótay-Nagy (2023) and Bhandari et al. (2025).

The wording and organization of both guides were adapted to the objectives, participants, and educational context of the present research. Consequently, the instruments were considered adapted semi-structured guides rather than standardized questionnaires. The previous studies provided empirical and conceptual support for the domains explored, while the questions were formulated to address the specific context of the present study.

Instrument Review and Validation

The focus-group and interview guides were prepared using thematic areas identified in previous research and adapted to the objectives of the present study. Before the data collection process, both instruments were reviewed by three specialists with backgrounds in research methodology, teaching and education, and English language teaching. This review was intended to determine whether the questions were appropriate for the participants and aligned with the purpose of the research.

The review focused on assessing the clarity, relevance, and coherence of the questions in relation to the research objectives. It also examined their suitability for the intended participants and their correspondence with the main areas of the study, including student engagement, learner diversity, learning difficulties, classroom participation, instructional practices, and perceived needs.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted at the participating educational institution in September 2026. Five focus groups were held in English, involving six students from each of the five second-year BGU parallel classes (A–E). The same semi-structured guide was used in all sessions to explore comparable topics while allowing students to describe experiences specific to their classrooms.

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

Before each focus group, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and emphasized that participation was voluntary. Students were encouraged to share their experiences, respond to their classmates' opinions, and discuss both positive and challenging aspects of learning English. They were also informed that they could choose not to answer questions that made them uncomfortable.

Two English teachers participated in individual semi-structured interviews conducted in English at the school during the same month. The interviews addressed their experiences teaching mixed-level classes, students' participation and learning difficulties, current instructional practices, and possible strategies for encouraging engagement.

The focus groups and teacher interviews were audio-recorded, and the researcher also took field notes during the sessions. The recordings supported the transcription and review of participants' responses, while the notes complemented the recorded information during the organization and thematic analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

Data from the five student focus groups and two teacher interviews were examined through thematic analysis. The process began by organizing and transcribing the recorded responses. The transcripts were then read several times to become familiar with what participants had expressed and to identify statements related to their classroom experiences, learning difficulties, and participation in English activities. This initial review helped establish a basis for the subsequent coding process.

During coding, attention was given to recurring ideas concerning English proficiency, confidence, classroom participation, learning difficulties, teaching practices, and the support students needed. Responses expressing similar ideas were grouped into broader categories, which were later used to develop the main themes. This process allowed the analysis to move beyond individual statements and identify patterns shared by participants, as well as differences in their experiences.

Student data were first examined within each focus group and then compared across the five parallel classes to identify common patterns as well as differences among classroom experiences. The two teacher interviews were initially analyzed as separate sources and later contrasted with student perspectives. The purpose of this comparison was to identify areas

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

of convergence, divergence, and complementary interpretation rather than to calculate numerical or statistical differences.

The analysis followed a qualitative sequence involving data organization, coding, identification of patterns, development of themes, and interpretation. The resulting themes provided the empirical basis for determining the most relevant student needs and classroom challenges and informed the development of contextualized teaching strategies for mixed-level English classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, a formal written request for institutional authorization was submitted to the school principal, who approved the research activities. Once the student participants had been selected, the tutors of the five parallel classes coordinated the distribution and collection of consent forms signed by their parents or legal representatives.

Before each focus-group session, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the use of audio recordings. Students were given the opportunity to decide whether they wished to participate and provided verbal assent. Similarly, the two English teachers were informed about the research and the recording of their interviews. Both teachers voluntarily agreed to participate and provided verbal consent. To protect participants' privacy, identification codes were used instead of real names when reporting quotations and qualitative findings. Audio recordings, field notes, and transcripts were stored on the researcher's personal mobile phone, to which only the researcher had access. The collected information was used exclusively for the purposes of the present academic research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the five student focus groups and two teacher interviews revealed several issues that shaped participants' experiences in mixed-level English classrooms. These included differences in English proficiency, students' confidence when participating, difficulties with particular language skills, and preferences for certain classroom activities. The analysis also considered how students interacted with their classmates and the support provided by teachers. Responses were examined across the five classes and then compared

with the teachers' perspectives to identify shared experiences, differences, and additional insights.

Five main themes were identified: (1) diversity in proficiency and learning needs, (2) confidence, preparation, and oral participation, (3) engagement through interactive, collaborative, and creative activities, (4) skill-specific difficulties and preferences, and (5) differentiated instructional support. Table 3 summarizes the thematic structure used to organize the findings.

Table 3

Themes and subthemes identified through thematic analysis

Theme	Subthemes	Main evidence identified
Diversity in proficiency and learning needs	Differences in proficiency; learning pace; skill-specific strengths; peer support	Students recognized differences in English level, learning speed, strengths, and amount of support required.
Confidence, preparation, and oral participation	Speaking confidence; fear of mistakes; pronunciation; preparation; public speaking	Confidence varied among students and classes. Preparation and familiarity with tasks were repeatedly associated with greater willingness to participate.
Interactive, collaborative, and creative engagement	Games; conversations; group work; competitions; creative products; peer interaction	Students frequently associated participation and interest with interactive, collaborative, and creative activities.
Skill-specific difficulties and preferences	Grammar; writing; speaking; listening; vocabulary	Difficulties varied according to language skill, student, and class rather than following the same pattern across all groups.
Differentiated instructional support	Examples; feedback; preparation time; repetition; scaffolding; differentiated tasks; encouragement	Students identified different forms of support that facilitated understanding and participation.

Note. Themes and subthemes were developed from the thematic analysis of the five student focus groups and the responses of the two English teachers.

Diversity in proficiency and learning needs

Students in all five focus groups recognized that their classmates did not have the same level of English or learn at the same pace. Some felt comfortable completing activities independently, while others needed additional explanations, examples, or time. The

responses also revealed differences in confidence and strengths across language skills. As a result, students did not necessarily experience the same classroom activity in the same way, even when they were working on identical tasks.

In Class A, A-S3 explained that "Some classmates need more explanation or more time," while A-S5 stated that "Some students need more examples and time." Similar perceptions appeared in Class B, where students recognized differences in how quickly classmates understood content and completed activities. Class C participants also identified substantial variation, particularly between students who responded quickly and those who required additional support.

Students from Classes D and E similarly recognized differences despite generally positive participation. D-S3 explained that "Some speak better and others write better," illustrating that proficiency differences were not limited to an overall English level. Instead, students could demonstrate strengths in one language skill while requiring greater support in another. Mixed proficiency was perceived both positively and negatively. Some students valued the possibility of learning from classmates with stronger English skills. A-S6 stated that "working with classmates who know more can also help." Similar responses appeared in other groups, where students described peer explanations as useful. However, mixed proficiency could also create hesitation. A-S5 reported participating less when classmates answered very quickly, while students from Classes B and C similarly expressed discomfort when more proficient classmates responded first.

Both teachers identified the same general pattern. Teacher 1 described clear differences among the five classes and particularly noticeable internal variation in Class C. Teacher 2 similarly reported that some students could communicate and understand instructions with little difficulty, whereas others still struggled with vocabulary and sentence structures. Both teachers also observed that higher-proficiency students frequently responded more quickly and participated more often.

These results are consistent with research on mixed-ability EFL classrooms. Bhandari et al. (2025) describe differentiated instruction in secondary mixed-ability English classrooms as a response to diverse proficiency levels and report practices such as flexible grouping, peer support, and scaffolding. Similarly, Tillaguango-Pintado and Argudo-Serrano (2024)

identify differences in skills, previous learning experiences, interests, and needs as central challenges in mixed-level English classes.

These findings suggest that differences among students cannot be explained only by dividing them into higher- and lower-proficiency groups. Their responses showed that learning pace, confidence, strengths in specific language skills, and the support needed to complete activities also played an important role. This distinction is relevant when considering differentiated instruction, since students may need different forms of assistance even when their overall English proficiency is similar. Such an interpretation is consistent with the attention given to readiness, interests, and learning profiles in differentiated teaching (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021).

Confidence, preparation, and oral participation

Students' confidence when speaking English was another important issue identified in the focus groups. While some participants felt comfortable expressing themselves in front of their classmates, others described nervousness, fear of making mistakes, or concern about pronunciation. These experiences differed across the five classes and sometimes among students from the same group. Preparation time and the type of speaking activity also appeared to influence how willing students felt to participate.

Class A showed relatively positive attitudes toward speaking. A-S1 stated, “I feel confident because I like speaking English,” while A-S2 described feeling comfortable, particularly during presentations. However, other students in the same group expressed more conditional confidence. A-S4 explained, “I feel a little nervous because I don't want to make mistakes,” while A-S5 indicated that confidence depended on familiarity with the topic.

A different pattern emerged in Class B. Several students described speaking and oral presentations as uncomfortable. B-S1 reported feeling nervous about pronunciation, while B-S2 stated that speaking in front of the class reduced confidence. Dependence on written notes was also common.

Class C demonstrated considerable internal variation. Some students expressed confidence, whereas others reported fear of pronunciation mistakes, discomfort during presentations, or greater confidence when using prepared notes. Class D showed generally stronger willingness to participate. D-S3 stated that “Mistakes are part of learning,” while D-S6 explained that “Participation helps me improve.”

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

Class E provided an important distinction between ability and preference. E-S2 stated, "I dislike public speaking although I can do it." This indicates that successful completion of an oral task does not necessarily imply that the student experiences the activity positively.

The teachers' responses reinforced this pattern. Teacher 1 observed that students in Classes B and C frequently relied on notes during presentations. Teacher 2 similarly reported that fear of pronunciation mistakes and negative reactions from classmates could reduce confidence. Both teachers emphasized preparation as a factor that supported participation.

The students also repeatedly mentioned preparation time, pair practice, smaller speaking groups, and familiarity with the topic as conditions that facilitated oral participation.

These findings are comparable with Wang et al. (2024), who explored engagement among high school EFL learners in relation to learning environment, content, teacher-student interaction, and motivation. Their qualitative findings highlight the importance of students' experiences and emotional responses in understanding engagement. Wu et al. (2024) similarly identified internal and external antecedents associated with engagement among senior high school EFL students.

Yang and Liu (2024) also reported that proficiency, classroom climate, teaching strategies, and teaching style were among the factors associated with different dimensions of English-learning engagement. The current findings extend this perspective by demonstrating how such factors appear in students' own descriptions of oral participation: some students hesitate because of pronunciation, fear of mistakes, lack of preparation, or comparison with classmates.

Thus, oral participation should not be interpreted simply as visible speaking behavior. Fredricks et al. (2004) conceptualize engagement as multidimensional, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components, while Philp and Duchesne (2016) extend this understanding to language-learning tasks by emphasizing cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional engagement. These perspectives help explain why observable participation alone does not fully represent students' engagement with speaking activities.

Interactive, collaborative, and creative activities as sources of engagement

When students described the activities, they enjoyed most in English class, many referred to opportunities to interact, collaborate, or create something with their classmates. Games, conversations, Spelling Bee, competitions, posters, comics, and group projects

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

were mentioned across the focus groups. Although preferences varied among classes, these activities were generally associated with greater interest and willingness to participate. The responses suggest that students valued lessons in which they could take an active role rather than spend most of their time completing repetitive tasks.

In Class A, A-S2 preferred "Games, conversations, and presentations because they are more dynamic," while A-S6 stated that "Activities where we can talk and work together are more interesting." A-S1 similarly valued working with classmates because students could help one another.

Class B showed a particularly positive response to Spelling Bee, dictation, and vocabulary activities. B-S1 explained that "Spelling Bee is fun and helps me practice words." These activities appeared to provide structured opportunities for participation without creating the same pressure associated with extended oral presentations.

Class C demonstrated strong interest in creative production. C-S3 stated that "Comics and posters let me be creative," while other participants valued writing, listening, vocabulary activities, and group discussions. In contrast, repetitive work reduced interest. C-S2 explained, "I lose interest when we only copy."

Class D participants reported broad engagement with activities including conversations, presentations, games, projects, writing, listening, and Spelling Bee. Class E similarly preferred games, group projects, listening, collaborative writing, and creative activities over extended individual speaking.

Both teachers reported comparable experiences. Teacher 1 identified Spelling Bee, collaborative group work, comics, and posters as activities associated with positive student responses. Teacher 2 similarly identified Spelling Bee, vocabulary games, role-plays, collaborative projects, posters, comics, and short dialogues as activities that encouraged participation.

These findings are consistent with Skarpaas (2024), who found that upper secondary students associated engagement in L2 English teaching with relevance, active and social methods, and teacher-related factors. The emphasis on active and social participation closely resembles the preferences expressed by participants in the present study.

The findings are also compatible with Lakew et al. (2025), who identify cooperative learning, task-based learning, project-based learning, differentiated learning, problem

solving, critical thinking, and technology among approaches considered innovative in EFL teaching. Although their study involved primary-school teachers, their broader conceptualization supports the idea that innovation is not limited to technology but can involve more participatory and learner-centered pedagogical approaches.

Importantly, however, the current results show that no single activity was equally preferred by all classes. Oral presentations, for example, were positively perceived by some students in Classes A and D but were less preferred in Classes B and E. Consequently, the findings suggest that the relevance of an activity depends on how well it responds to the characteristics of a particular group.

Skill-specific difficulties and preferences

The fourth theme revealed that language-learning difficulties varied substantially across classes and skills. Grammar and writing were particularly challenging in some groups, whereas speaking and listening represented greater difficulties in others. Vocabulary tended to be perceived more positively.

In Class A, grammar and writing appeared repeatedly as challenging areas. A-S1 stated that "Difficult grammar topics are harder," while A-S4 indicated that grammar could become confusing when too many rules were involved. Writing also generated lower interest. A-S3 explained, "When we have to write a lot, I lose interest."

Class B presented a different profile. Grammar and vocabulary were relatively manageable for several students, whereas speaking, listening, and writing were more difficult. B-S2 stated that grammar was clear but writing sentences was harder. B-S3 also described fast audio as difficult to understand.

Class C generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward vocabulary, listening, and creative writing, although speaking and pronunciation presented difficulties for some participants. Class D showed comparatively positive experiences across language skills, although long grammar and writing tasks were occasionally described as demanding. Class E tended to favor listening, vocabulary, writing, collaborative work, and creative activities over public speaking.

Table 4 summarizes the main patterns identified across the five student groups.

Table 4

Cross-class summary of student focus-group patterns

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

Class	Main strengths and preferences	Main challenges	Engagement-related pattern
A	Speaking, vocabulary, listening, games, conversations, group work	Complex grammar and extended writing	Generally positive participation; confidence varies according to task difficulty and familiarity
B	Vocabulary, Spelling Bee, dictation, structured activities	Speaking confidence, presentations, listening, sentence writing	Strong preference for structured and prepared participation
C	Vocabulary, listening, creative writing, comics, posters, discussion	Uneven speaking confidence, pronunciation, public speaking	Considerable internal variation; creativity and interaction are valued
D	Speaking, listening, vocabulary, interaction, projects, varied activities	Some long grammar and writing tasks	Broad participation and generally positive attitudes across activities
E	Listening, vocabulary, writing, games, collaborative and creative activities	Public speaking and extended individual oral tasks	Students participate but often prefer collaborative formats to public speaking

Note. The table summarizes qualitative patterns emerging from the student focus groups. It is not intended as a quantitative ranking of the five classes.

The teachers' observations supported this variation. Teacher 1 described vocabulary as comparatively accessible while identifying writing and complex grammar structures as areas requiring greater support. Teacher 2 likewise considered vocabulary relatively manageable, while speaking and writing were described as more challenging because students experienced difficulties organizing ideas and using grammatical structures.

These results align with Tillaguango-Pintado and Argudo-Serrano (2024), whose synthesis of mixed-level EFL classes identifies diverse abilities, previous knowledge, interests, and learning needs among the principal challenges teachers must address. Bhandari et al. (2025) similarly report that mixed-ability classrooms require differentiated practices because learner needs cannot be addressed effectively through a single uniform approach.

The results also reflect the differentiation perspective described by Abramova and Mashoshina (2021), who distinguish differentiation according to content, process, and product based on students' readiness, interests, and profiles. In the present study, students'

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

differing responses to grammar, writing, speaking, listening, and vocabulary suggest that differentiation may need to address both language difficulty and task format.

Teacher support, scaffolding, and differentiated participation

Students across the five groups consistently identified forms of instructional support that helped them understand classroom content and participate more confidently. These included clear explanations, examples, feedback, repetition, correction, preparation time, encouragement, and opportunities to practice before more demanding activities.

Class A strongly emphasized explanation and gradual support. A-S1 stated, “Examples and clear explanations help me, especially with grammar,” while A-S6 reported understanding difficult grammar better when it was explained “step by step.” A-S5 also indicated that preparation time increased willingness to participate.

Class B students similarly valued preparation and examples. Participants referred to practice before speaking, repetition of listening material, and examples for sentence construction. B-S6 summarized this relationship by stating, “Preparation time makes me confident.”

Class C participants emphasized pronunciation feedback, explanations of unfamiliar expressions, examples, and repetition. Students from Classes D and E also referred positively to feedback, teacher encouragement, explanations, and guided practice.

Both teachers described similar forms of support. Teacher 1 reported providing additional examples and exercises when students had difficulty with grammar and using a range of classroom activities to provide different ways of practicing English. Teacher 2 reported using clear examples, guided exercises, visual materials, group work, preparation time, and different levels of difficulty.

These findings are closely related to Bhandari et al. (2025), whose study of secondary mixed-ability English classrooms identified flexible grouping, peer support, and scaffolding among differentiated practices used by teachers. Their study also reported practical barriers such as limited time, large classes, resources, and teacher preparation, indicating that differentiated instruction must remain feasible in real classroom settings.

Similarly, Samira et al. (2025) identified differentiation, classroom management, equity, and learner-centered strategies as important issues in secondary mixed-ability English classrooms. Rayamajhi (2025) also documented teachers’ perceptions of the challenges involved in teaching students with diverse abilities.

The current findings provide additional student-based evidence for these concerns. Students did not necessarily request completely different lessons; instead, many requested changes in the amount of support they received through examples, preparation time, repetition, feedback, or adjusted difficulty.

This suggests that differentiated participation may involve adapting the conditions under which students complete tasks rather than permanently separating students according to ability.

Students' suggestions for more engaging mixed-level English classes

The final focus-group question asked students what strategies or changes could help learners with different English levels participate and learn more actively. Their responses closely reflected the difficulties and preferences identified throughout the preceding themes.

Class A participants proposed more speaking activities and conversations at different levels, games, interactive activities, group work, differentiated exercises, additional examples, and less theoretical grammar practice.

Class B emphasized vocabulary games, Spelling Bee, dictation, guided writing, repeated listening, preparation before speaking, and activities adjusted to different levels.

Class C proposed conversations, creative writing, group discussions, comics, posters, paired speaking, listening, small-group preparation, and additional preparation time.

Class D suggested conversations, presentations, games, projects, competitions, creative activities, and greater variety across skills.

Class E emphasized paired speaking, interactive games, group projects, creative writing, listening activities, and shorter speaking tasks.

Across the five groups, several recurring principles emerged: variety, interaction, collaboration, creativity, preparation, differentiated levels of challenge, and opportunities for active participation.

This pattern is compatible with Skarpaas (2024), whose participants emphasized relevance and active/social methods as important factors associated with engagement in upper secondary L2 English teaching. It also corresponds with Bhandari et al. (2025), who describe differentiated instruction as involving flexible grouping, peer support, and scaffolding in mixed-ability classrooms.

The findings further support the relevance of contextualized rather than uniform strategies. Tillaguango-Pintado and Argudo-Serrano (2024) emphasize that mixed-level English classrooms involve diverse abilities, backgrounds, interests, and needs. In the current study, this diversity was evident not only between individual learners but also between entire classes.

Therefore, the proposed strategies should not be identical for Classes A–E. Rather, the findings support a flexible framework in which activities can be adjusted according to confidence, proficiency, language skill, and classroom preference.

Comparison of the two teachers' perspectives

The two teachers demonstrated substantial agreement regarding the main characteristics and challenges of the mixed-level classrooms. Both identified differences in proficiency, participation, confidence, and learning needs and emphasized preparation, collaboration, interactive learning, and differentiated support.

Table 5

Comparison of the two teachers' perspectives

Aspect	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Relationship between perspectives
Proficiency differences	Identified clear differences across and within Classes A–E	Identified noticeable differences in communication, vocabulary, sentence structures, speaking, and writing	Strong convergence
Participation	Higher-proficiency students often participate more; patterns differ by class	Higher-level students frequently answer faster and may dominate participation	Strong convergence
Speaking	Particularly difficult in B and C; reliance on notes during presentations	Generally challenging for less confident students; fear of mistakes affects participation	Strong convergence
Writing	Difficulty constructing grammatically correct sentences	Difficulty organizing ideas and applying grammatical structures	Strong convergence

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

Grammar	Complex structures require examples and additional practice	Long explanations and repetitive exercises may reduce interest	Complementary perspectives
Vocabulary	Generally one of the easier areas	Generally easier, especially through examples and games	Strong convergence
Listening	Performance varies across classes	Pronunciation and speech rate can create difficulty	Convergence
Confidence	Understanding the topic and preparation support participation	Preparation, encouragement, and partner practice support confidence	Strong convergence
Interactive activities	Spelling Bee, group work, comics, and posters generate positive responses	Spelling Bee, vocabulary games, role-plays, projects, comics, posters, and dialogues encourage participation	Strong convergence
Group work	Positive overall; equal distribution of responsibility requires further attention	Stronger students can help peers but may sometimes complete most of the task	Complementary evidence
Differentiated support	Recommends guided examples, extra practice, pair/small-group speaking, and greater challenge for stronger learners	Recommends differentiated tasks, sentence starters, vocabulary guides, visual support, and different levels of difficulty	Strong convergence

Note. "Convergence" indicates that the teachers expressed comparable perspectives, whereas "complementary" indicates that their responses addressed different aspects of the same issue.

Both teachers associated proficiency differences with uneven participation. Teacher 1 emphasized this particularly in Class C, whereas Teacher 2 reported that a small number of higher-proficiency students sometimes contributed more frequently than the rest of the class. Both teachers also identified preparation as an important factor in oral confidence. Teacher 1 observed that students appeared more comfortable when they understood the topic and had enough time to prepare. Teacher 2 similarly emphasized preparation, encouragement, and partner practice.

Their perspectives on collaborative learning were complementary. Teacher 1 recognized students' positive response to group work but indicated that the distribution of participation deserved closer attention. Teacher 2 reported that stronger students often supported their

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

classmates but could sometimes complete most of the task. This led Teacher 2 to emphasize the importance of assigning specific responsibilities.

The challenges described by the two teachers reflect concerns identified in previous research on mixed-ability English classrooms. Although differentiated instruction offers ways to respond to students with different proficiency levels, teachers may encounter difficulties related to instructional time, class size, available resources, and professional preparation (Bhandari et al., 2025). Similar concerns about differentiation and classroom management have been documented in secondary education (Samira et al., 2025), while teachers' experiences of addressing diverse student abilities have also been explored in qualitative research (Rayamajhi, 2025).

Overall, Teacher 1 contributed a more detailed class-by-class description, while Teacher 2 provided additional information about participation imbalance, peer reactions, group roles, and specific forms of scaffolding. Their perspectives were therefore largely convergent and complementary rather than contradictory.

Integrated interpretation of student and teacher perspectives

The comparison of the five student focus groups and the two teacher interviews revealed substantial convergence across the data sources.

First, both students and teachers consistently recognized differences in proficiency, pace, confidence, language-skill strengths, and support needs. Students described classmates who responded more quickly, understood tasks more easily, or required additional explanation. Both teachers reported similar differences.

Second, proficiency appeared to influence participation, although it did not determine it completely. Some students reported hesitating when classmates responded quickly, and the teachers similarly observed that higher-proficiency learners frequently participated more often. Nevertheless, Class E demonstrated that students could participate actively despite reporting relatively low preference for public speaking.

Third, oral confidence emerged as a shared concern. Students described nervousness, fear of mistakes, pronunciation difficulties, and dependence on preparation. Both teachers reported similar observations, particularly during presentations.

Fourth, interactive and collaborative activities represented one of the strongest points of convergence. Students repeatedly described games, group work, conversations,

competitions, projects, comics, and posters positively. Both teachers independently referred to many of the same activities.

Fifth, students and teachers emphasized the importance of instructional support. Preparation, examples, repetition, feedback, encouragement, and differentiated levels of difficulty appeared repeatedly in both sets of data.

These findings can be understood through the multidimensional view of engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), who distinguish behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Philp and Duchesne (2016) similarly emphasize cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional dimensions of engagement in language-learning tasks.

The participants' responses illustrate these dimensions within the present context. Behavioral engagement was evident in participation and task involvement; emotional engagement appeared in confidence, nervousness, enjoyment, and interest; cognitive engagement was reflected in the need for understanding, preparation, and appropriate challenge; and social engagement appeared strongly in collaborative work and peer support.

The findings are also consistent with Yang and Liu (2024), who identified proficiency, teaching strategies, classroom climate, and teaching style among factors related to English-learning engagement. Wang et al. (2024) and Wu et al. (2024) likewise demonstrate that engagement among senior high school EFL learners is influenced by multiple contextual and individual factors rather than by a single classroom variable.

Taken together, the students' and teachers' perspectives indicate that engagement in these mixed-level English classrooms was related to several interconnected conditions. Students' confidence, differences in language ability, the demands of classroom activities, peer interaction, and the support provided by teachers all appeared relevant to their willingness to participate. These findings highlight the importance of considering students' experiences alongside classroom practices when identifying strategies to encourage engagement.

Implications for the development of innovative teaching strategies

The experiences shared by students and teachers provided a starting point for identifying teaching strategies suited to the participating mixed-level English classrooms. Rather than selecting activities solely because they are considered innovative, the proposals were developed in response to the learning difficulties, participation patterns, and classroom preferences identified during the study. Since the strategies were not implemented

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

or evaluated, the findings cannot establish whether they would improve student engagement. Their contribution lies in offering context-informed pedagogical alternatives that may be examined in future research.

First, differentiated participation appears necessary. Students repeatedly recognized differences in proficiency, learning pace, confidence, and skill-specific strengths. Bhandari et al. (2025), Abramova and Mashoshina (2021), and Tillaguango-Pintado and Argudo-Serrano (2024) all emphasize the need to respond to diversity in mixed-level or mixed-ability classrooms.

Second, oral participation should include progressive support. Pair practice, small-group preparation, sentence support, shorter speaking tasks, and preparation time may respond to the needs of students who reported anxiety or dependence on written notes.

Third, collaborative learning should be structured. Assigning meaningful roles may allow students with different proficiency levels to contribute while reducing the risk that stronger students complete most of the work.

Fourth, innovative strategies should incorporate variety. Students expressed interest in conversations, games, group projects, Spelling Bee, comics, posters, role-plays, listening tasks, creative writing, and other interactive formats. Lakew et al. (2025) similarly present innovative teaching as a broad category that can include cooperative learning, task-based learning, project-based learning, differentiated learning, problem solving, and other pedagogical approaches rather than being limited to technological innovation.

Fifth, activities should remain context-sensitive. Skarpaas (2024) highlights relevance as an important factor in student engagement, while Tillaguango-Pintado and Argudo-Serrano (2024) emphasize the particular challenges of mixed-level EFL contexts. This suggests that proposed strategies should be selected according to the characteristics of each class rather than applied uniformly.

Finally, differentiated strategies must remain feasible for teachers. Bhandari et al. (2025) identified time, large classes, resources, and teacher preparation as practical difficulties associated with differentiation. Therefore, the final proposal should seek a balance between responding to individual differences and maintaining realistic classroom implementation.

The findings suggest that students' willingness to engage in English lessons was influenced by how accessible, interesting, and manageable they perceived classroom activities

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63688/wy9r9q47

to be. Opportunities to interact with classmates and receive appropriate teacher support were also important in their responses. For this reason, the proposed strategies emphasize different ways of participating, allowing teachers to consider students' proficiency, confidence, learning pace, and specific language difficulties when planning classroom activities.

Proposed Innovative Teaching Strategies for Mixed-Level English Classrooms

The responses collected from the five student focus groups and the two teacher interviews helped identify teaching strategies that could address the needs of the participating mixed-level English classrooms. Five strategies were proposed: differentiated communicative tasks, scaffolded speaking activities, role-based collaborative learning, interactive vocabulary and language games, and creative language production projects. Each proposal was informed by the difficulties, classroom experiences, and activity preferences described by the participants. Table 6 outlines how these strategies could be applied and indicates the learning needs and classes for which they may be particularly relevant.

Table 6

Proposed Innovative Teaching Strategies Based on the Study Findings

Proposed strategy	Suggested pedagogical application	Identified needs and relevant classes
Differentiated Communicative Tasks	Provide communicative activities with varying levels of difficulty, vocabulary support, sentence models, and guided instructions while maintaining common learning objectives.	Differences in proficiency, learning pace, grammar, and writing difficulties. Particularly relevant to Classes A, B, and C.
Scaffolded Speaking Activities	Incorporate preparation time, guided dialogues, pair practice, small-group discussions, and progressively more demanding oral tasks.	Speaking anxiety, pronunciation difficulties, fear of mistakes, and limited confidence. Particularly relevant to Classes B, C, and E.
Role-Based Collaborative Learning	Organize mixed-proficiency groups with clearly defined responsibilities to encourage peer support and balanced participation.	Unequal participation, differences in proficiency, and preferences for collaborative

		learning. Relevant across the five classes.
Interactive Vocabulary and Language Games	Use Spelling Bee, vocabulary games, educational competitions, and guided language activities with different levels of challenge.	Interest in interactive and structured activities. Particularly relevant to Classes B and D.
Creative Language Production Projects	Develop comics, posters, collaborative writing tasks, short dialogues, and creative projects with differentiated instructional support.	Interest in creative activities and alternative forms of participation. Particularly relevant to Classes C, D, and E.

Note. The proposed strategies were developed from the qualitative findings of the five student focus groups and the two teacher interviews. Their suggested applications and class priorities represent contextualized pedagogical recommendations rather than experimentally validated interventions.

Although the five strategies were developed from the needs identified in this particular school, they were not intended to be applied in exactly the same way across all classes. Students differed in their English proficiency, confidence, learning pace, and preferences for classroom activities. For this reason, the proposals allow teachers to adjust the level of support, the organization of group work, and the type of participation expected from students. These adaptations may help address the difficulties reported during the focus groups and interviews. However, because the strategies were neither implemented nor evaluated in this study, their effectiveness remains an issue for future research.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings show that students' engagement in mixed-level English classrooms varied according to their language abilities, confidence, learning needs, and classroom experiences. Through the five focus groups and interviews with two English teachers, the study identified differences in how students responded to the same learning activities. Some students participated comfortably, while others needed additional preparation, guidance, or opportunities to work with classmates. These experiences highlight why teaching strategies should consider both individual learning needs and the conditions in which classroom participation takes place.

ISSN: 3091-1672
Vol. 3 Núm. 1 (2026)

The students' responses revealed that learning difficulties were not the same across the five classes. While some participants struggled with grammar and writing, others found speaking or listening more challenging. Confidence also influenced how students approached oral activities, particularly when they were concerned about pronunciation, making mistakes, or speaking in front of their classmates. These differences suggest the importance of providing appropriate guidance, preparation time, and opportunities for participation that take students' individual learning needs into account.

Both students and teachers described interactive and collaborative activities as valuable opportunities for classroom participation. Games, Spelling Bee, conversations, group projects, comics, and posters were among the activities students frequently associated with greater interest in learning English. However, the focus groups also showed that preferences varied across classes, particularly regarding speaking activities. This suggests that teachers should offer different ways for students to participate rather than relying on a single type of activity. Collaborative tasks also need clear responsibilities so that students with different English proficiency levels have opportunities to contribute.

Drawing on the needs and experiences identified during the research, five teaching strategies were proposed: differentiated communicative tasks, scaffolded speaking activities, role-based collaborative learning, interactive vocabulary and language games, and creative language production projects. The proposals were developed to offer different forms of support and participation according to students' proficiency, confidence, learning pace, and classroom preferences. Each strategy was connected to difficulties or interests described by participants in the five classes. Nevertheless, these strategies remain pedagogical proposals, since they were not implemented or evaluated as part of the study.

As a qualitative case study conducted in one educational institution in Santa Elena, Ecuador, this research offers an understanding of engagement based on the experiences of the participating students and teachers. Its findings provide a starting point for developing teaching strategies that respond to the needs identified in these mixed-level English classrooms. However, the study did not examine how students would respond to the proposed strategies in practice, so conclusions about their effectiveness cannot be drawn. Future studies could explore their implementation in similar educational contexts and examine how they relate to students' engagement over time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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