The Essence of CLIL
An Impromptu Conversation with Dr. David Marsh

One of the leading experts on CLIL worldwide, Dr. David Marsh has travelled widely all over the world and worked on international projects aimed at fostering language learning in complex, linguistic environments. Convinced that language is both a tool of communication and a tool of knowledge, that we live in a globalized world marked by the pervasive presence of the ICT, where it is necessary to learn languages to open people’s minds and hearts (and to foster empathy and equity), he launched the ground-breaking concept of CLIL in 1994. CLIL is about learning content subjects through a language or languages other than the mother tongue, it is the interweaving of content and language in a dual-focused way, so that students learn both specific subject contents and the language itself at the same time, almost without noticing, for language becomes the tool whereby human knowledge is constructed cooperatively in the classroom. Dr. Marsh is also well aware of the ethical dimension inherent in language learning and teaching: we are witnessing a true democratization in this respect due to the European policies implemented over the last years and, in this context, nobody should be left behind. CLIL seems to provide a good opportunity to make true the utopian dream of language learning as a universal right that might bring all humans closer together.

Born in Australia, educated in the United Kingdom and based in Finland for many years, David Marsh spent 15 years teaching before moving into management and coordination roles, often with European experts in trans-national analytic, research and development teams. He coordinated the European team that launched the concept of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) as a Europe-wide educational initiative in 1994. A long-standing area of personal and professional interest has been on how students learn, and teachers teach, in complex linguistic environments. This has involved cross-curriculum innovation as a driver of change especially with respect to technologies, bilingual methodologies, and teacher competence-building. This interest led to assignments in a range of European Union countries, East Asia, South America, and sub-Saharan Africa (2000-2011). During 2010-2011 he was instrumental in the design and set-up of Finnish-based primary school operations in Abu Dhabi. In January 2012 he was appointed as educational strategy and policy advisor in the Prime Minister’s Office of the United Arab Emirates. In 2008, he was awarded a joint commendation for HRH The Duke of Edinburgh English Language Book Award of the English-Speaking Union, and, in 2009, The Estonian Education Sciences Award for Applied Didactics. Having published extensively, he is co-author of Uncovering CLIL, Oxford: Macmillan 2008, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, and co-editor of Quality Interfaces: Examining Evidence & Exploring Solutions in CLIL, Eichstätt Academic Press 2012. Future 2013 publications include The CLIL Trajectory: Transformation through Collaboration (probably through the University of Córdoba), and The Higher Education Languages Landscape (probably through Apple).

On 15 November 2012, David Marsh gave a lecture entitled Forces Driving CLIL at the Centro del Profesorado Luisa Revuelta in Córdoba (Spain) and then he was so kind as to spend about three hours with us. There were eleven people present: Dr.
Marsh, Professor Víctor Pavón (from the University of Córdoba), Professor Teresa Gerdes (from the University Pontificia Comillas in Madrid), Ana Mª Calatayud (Plurilingualism Coordinator in Córdoba), Mª Ángeles Hernández (Plurilingualism Coordinator in Huelva), Antonio R. Roldán and Francisco Melara (teacher trainers and experts on bilingualism), Pilar Torres, Francisco J. Blázquez, Margarita Tejederas (Teacher Training Advisors at CEP Luisa Revuelta in Córdoba) and Leonor M. Martínez Serrano (Teacher Training Advisor at CEP Priego-Montilla). What follows is a transcript of the interview we conducted before having dinner together.

Leonor M. Martínez. Who is David Marsh? Could you, please, tell us a little bit about yourself? A long-standing area of personal and professional interest for you has been how students learn and how teachers teach in complex linguistic environments. At which point in your life did you decide you wanted to devote yourself to the study of language learning and to the world of education? Why is education essential to you?

David Marsh. I was a university teacher at the age of 22 and I was senior lecturer at, I think, 25. And it was a wonderful life. I taught for five months a year and I had the rest of the year off on salary. I met an exceptional woman, we got married, and decided to go to a completely different country from either my country or her country. We found ourselves in Brunei, Borneo. That was the time when they introduced English into the schools and they thought that if they brought English native-speakers from Birmingham, Bolton, or Brimingham over to teach in Brunei, everything would be OK. But it wasn’t. So I saw that, did research on that, and found the challenges of changing the language of schools very interesting. Then I moved back to Europe and everybody was talking about basically English, internationalizing English, so I got interested in that. I didn’t want to stay with it; I wanted to move on to another area, which was organizational communications management, but this became too important and I needed to stay with it. Then, the more I looked at it, the more fascinating I found it, because I thought: I can work with teachers who are very interesting and very inspiring, and can work in an area of transformational change. In fact, my education was very boring and very dull (I think probably because of me) and so I found CLIL very inspiring. And it’s just gone on and on and on, and become ever more fascinating and inspiring. That’s why I stayed with it. And that’s basically me.

LM. Let us focus now on the nature of language, on the concept of language, as well as on language learning. What is language for you and why is it so important? Which is your definition of language? Why should people learn to communicate in more than one language?

Pilar Torres: Regarding the second part of your question, why is it important to be able to communicate in several languages, I think the main factor could be the fact of globalization. Whether we like it or not, we live in a globalized world and it is important to learn other languages and other cultures.

Teresa Gerdes: For me, language is clearly verbal communication and non-verbal communication, and I think we need to pay close attention to the non-verbal part of communication, just as much or perhaps even more than the verbal communication.
Also, I think that learning another language opens our minds and gives us empathy and helps us understand each other in international contexts.

DM. I think there are many ways of looking at language and I think we need to take this word literacy very carefully. We were talking about DSL earlier, Digital as a Second Language. Now, this is not another short-lived silly acronym. It is the new reality. Mathematics is a language, dance is a language. Well, what you just said, Teresa, about non-verbal, is a very interesting part of language. So I think language is a means to an end which involves various forms of sharing and various forms of cooperation, because if you don’t use it, you cannot share, you cannot cooperate. The other thing about why we should be communicating in more than language, is that we do it all the time. We do it non-verbally, we do it through smile, sound, expression, through what we don’t say even. We continuously communicate through more than one language. Sometimes when I’m using the Internet, I’m not sure which language I’m really using: whether it’s Internet language, English, or whether I have slipped into another language. So I think it is a matter of broadening the mind, of expanding horizons, and deepening depth of thinking. I think the research of what it means to try to compose a love poem in a second language like French alongside your first language is very exciting. We are talking here about enrichment through diversity of opportunity. It’s like a garden with different plants, a rain forest with its fauna and flora – the opposite of human-created city environments like Las Vegas or Dubai. It’s an enrichment. And, finally, it’s also a modesty energizer, because it’s only when you try to use another language that you realize what it means for anybody else who’s trying to use your language. Modesty, fusion and enrichment, various outcomes like this can be a result.

LM. This ties up with my next question, which is about the essence of CLIL & the findings of neurosciences. The world is a polyphonic place, a place where many languages (both human and nonhuman) are spoken, and CLIL is as old as humanity. All humans are bilingual (or plurilingual) to some extent: they inevitably have some kind of knowledge of languages, so it is hard to find people who have never been exposed to languages other than their mother tongue. Humanity is polyglot by nature, and a wide range of languages have been used for many different purposes since antiquity. It seems to me that CLIL is an example of the many things humans can accomplish through language: communication, self-expression, human interaction, knowledge construction, socializing, expressing emotions & ideas to others, etc. In fact, as you point out somewhere, what is distinctive about CLIL is the interweaving of content and language in a dual-focused way. This is learning by construction rather than learning by instruction. So this question is really about the origins and the nature of CLIL. What is unique about CLIL? What is the essence of CLIL? What are the core

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1 “The term CLIL (content and language integrated learning) was coined in 1994 in Europe. However, CLIL practice has a much longer history. The first known CLIL-type programme dates back some 5000 years to what is now modern-day Iraq. The Akkadians, who conquered the Sumerians, wanted to learn the local language. To this end, Sumerian was used as a medium of instruction to teach several subjects to the Akkadians, including theology, botany and zoology. If Sumerian instructors were true to the basic principles of CLIL, they supported the learning of Sumerian, as well as the learning of the content in theology, botany and zoology.” See Uncovering CLIL. Content and Language Integrated Learning in Bilingual and Multilingual Education, by Peeter Mehisto, David Marsh & Maria Jesús Frigols, Oxford: Macmillan, 2008, p. 9.
features of CLIL? When was it born and when was the word coined for the first time? And what are the benefits of CLIL?

DM. I moved from Borneo to Europe in 1988, during a time of tremendous pressure to internationalize some economies, which also involved equally tremendous pressure to have a fast acceleration of the learning of English in some countries. But we looked at all those different ways of combining language in content-based language teaching, immersion, and so on. We realized that none of these terms really suited this special kind of approach that we were talking about, because this is not content-based language teaching. That is different to CLIL, and immersion is different to CLIL, according to the parameters that we had then. So we had to come up with a new term, and I don’t remember now whether… I think it was me who introduced that term, put it on the table, and we had experts from at least 15 or 20 countries who were considering how the acronym could be rendered into different European languages, and does it work with me, and so on and so on. And that discussion went on for at least a year. And then in Spain, I was at an event which had a group of protestors barred from entering, and there is me thinking here I am, a speaker inside the event, but very favourable to the views of the protestors, because they are right. We do not need dogma which is fundamentalist in education, we need flexibility and choice, choice driven by science, emotion and pragmatism – not by cliques. I was there with a Dutch colleague, Anne Maljers. She and I had been working closely together for some time. She was an executive in the European Platform for Dutch Education, and we just agreed: We cannot lose any more time negotiating with fractured groups, OK, we’ve got these three, let’s go for CLIL. So that’s why we adopted CLIL. We had to make a decision, and that was after an awful lot of discussion. Did we want another acronym? No. Did we want to position ourselves as the inventors of a new way of doing something? No. What we wanted to do was to capture what was already happening and to try to use the European money to bring key people and groups together. A few years later, a senior European Commission person said to me: Can you explain, David, why CLIL has been so successful compared to other big initiatives, like we really pushed early language learning, we really pushed using technology for learning, but nothing has been as successful as CLIL. Why? And I said: Because the power behind CLIL, like the energy driving a tsunami, was happening already. We are riding the waves of what is now needed and expected of us as educators involved with languages. It was happening already. All I did, or my colleagues did, was to bring those people together and show them how much advantage they had from working together. But to answer your other questions: I don’t really think we knew what we were doing at that beginning. We looked at immersion very carefully, and we knew it was supported by multi-million dollar investments and very serious political priorities. We didn’t have the cash, and our priorities were socio-educational. We were not in the business of protecting the fabric of a country, as in immersion and Canada, we were interested in enhancing the education of young people across a range of countries. Then, after a few years, teachers were reporting back: Hey, this looks interesting. Certainly there was a lot of what we call anecdotal reporting from teachers. The universities were very slow, they can be slow-moving organisms and now, with the benefit of hindsight, I think they should have responded more quickly to this. And you know, languages tend to be the poor cousin in many countries, that is, in the Ministries of Education, for a host of reasons including recruitment and tenure of positions, and a general perception that not much can be done. Languages are languages, hard subjects
for many, let’s not rock the boat by expecting too much from too many. But when you combine language with Maths, or language with Physics, you actually double the power of both, you know. You certainly make things more powerful and more interesting. So there were many reasons why the anecdotal reporting was positive, and we called it the big honeymoon because we had a flow like the Orinoco. By 1996, I said this is turning into one big honeymoon, it’s too good to be true, all this stuff is too good to be true. It was like the joke about the Great Gatsby, wonderful party on New Year’s Eve, got home on 2 April. Now, many years later, we realize that CLIL offered a genuinely creative marriage, a view which is continuously supported now with the research coming out. If you want to really accelerate learning, you have to deal with emotions and, if you want to get kids emotionally positive, there are various ways of doing it, and this appears to be one of them. I think that is probably a very long answer to a very complicated question. You know there are, quite rightfully critics of CLIL. Sometimes they are loud, sometimes quiet, sometimes fair, sometimes lost in narrow worlds. Right now the positives vastly outweigh negatives, and when you look at criticism it is often about operational issues, not pedagogical-educational realities.

LM. To me this is the perfect answer, but I was thinking of what you said about neurosciences earlier in our seminar. I was wondering whether CLIL is good for the human body and the human mind. I’d like to ask you whether there is already enough evidence that this is the case. In what way can neurosciences help us understand CLIL?

DM. When we finished this study you refer to on the impact of languages on creativity, I thought the findings were extraordinary. All the time, we were taking research, testing it against people who might be critical and then getting consensus on potential of the findings. Actually, these studies are significant. We were always dealing with indicators. In the last few months, I have looked at the newest information coming from the field, as best I could, and there is much more of it revealing impact, which one assumes is largely positive. I haven’t really done the same kind of analysis I did when I worked on this a couple of years ago, but there is so much evidence which is promising, so I would say it’s a very promising horizon, it’s a very exciting horizon. Yes, that’s really about it. No proof, but indicators. As teachers, you know when something works, you know that feeling: Hey, that was good! It doesn’t happen very often, does it? When I look at giving a lecture or doing a workshop, the first thing I think is what do they want, what’s the point of this, you know. Is it to give them lots of information? Is it to inspire them, is it to intrude into comfort zones? What’s the point? And as soon as I get the point, then I feel I know how to get started and do what needs to be done. So my 40-minute lesson with some children may actually be nothing about teaching, it may be to inspire them, it may be to excite them, elicit, or whatever. I think the whole issue of why we do these things and the impact on people is something that I have learnt from looking at the neurosciences. I mean, all teachers could look at why did that lesson work, you know, because the methodology may have triggered something, which they can’t quite see because they haven’t had that supporting framework backing them up. So maybe these resources now, which are coming into education from the neurosciences – there are some superb materials available from Britain (it’s very good on this) –, they could be really inspiring for teachers, you know, to work on this form of practice. So yeah, promising. Why did you get interested in CLIL?
Because to me language is very important, and so is its profound link with human knowledge, and that’s what my next question is about: the connection between CLIL and knowledge. Everyone wants to know, said Aristotle at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* in ancient Greece over 2,300 years ago. The German poet Goethe, who was a firm believer in reason and in human progress, used to say that *all humans together know everything in this world*. Well, I’m convinced that *learning is the ultimate, true vocation of all human beings (present, past and future), of all ages*. In *Uncovering CLIL*, you point out that good CLIL practice is driven by cognition, by thinking, that is to say by the mental faculty of knowing. I’m very interested in the deep connections between CLIL and knowledge, in the way human beings construct knowledge over time as part of the uninterrupted legacy that social communities pass on to subsequent generations. Also, CLIL has to do with fusion, integration, interdisciplinarity, so that knowledge is approached in the classroom from a much more holistic (sensible) perspective and students go beyond the traditional fragmentation of the curriculum into separate, unconnected subjects. Humans use languages to learn about the mystery inherent in the world and learn to use languages to uncover the world within and without. Now, both things tend to happen simultaneously in a CLIL lesson, but also outside the classroom: language is always there mediating humans’ relations with other human beings and with the world at large (with reality). In this respect, I like the idea that *language is the very air we breathe* and so it goes unnoticed most of the time: it is inseparable from thinking and also from culture and our worldview, which is determined by the language we speak and think in. After all, words are inseparable from ideas & emotions; language is indispensable to the construction of human knowledge. Could you, please, elaborate a bit on this idea of CLIL and the way knowledge is handled by the school as a social institution in charge of transmitting this huge, invaluable legacy? Maybe this looks like a metaphysical question, and it has to do with epistemology indeed.

Mª Ángeles Hernández. Everybody has language inside them, but the problem is that, when you try to link it with knowledge, a teacher doing CLIL manipulates the language in order for the students to be able to access knowledge through language. If you are aware that you are not only a Maths teacher or a Science teacher, that you are first of all a language teacher… I mean, you need language to teach science and students need language to gain knowledge about science or any other discipline. This is the wonderful thing about CLIL, in my opinion. Every teacher has to think not only about the gist of his/her subject, but also has to be able to identify and select the language that students will need to deal with knowledge, just as the teacher adapts his/her language in order for the students to understand what he/she is trying to teach them. Thus, if you are in front of an audience of housewives or people with no literacy, and you speak about clouds, for instance, in a very complex, high register related to the world of physics, they will not understand you, so language is there… You need to manipulate language in order for your students to be successful and you as a teacher have to do it successfully, well, using the right vocabulary or activating the things they need to know before starting the lesson. This is, in my opinion, the link between knowledge and CLIL.

DM. You know, there are very few internet sites I visit voluntarily, but one of them is TED. And I’m working at the moment with a guy who has been instrumental in setting up TED events, a fantastic relationship, because the world of TED is extremely exciting
and cutting edge. Now, in TED you’ve got this classic speech by Ken Robinson, which is done using a continuous stream of graphics. He is speaking about what’s wrong with education and what Ken Robinson argues is that our educational system is still based on an industrialist strategy which is now outdated, rather than a competence-based education. Learning how to do is what our ancestors were doing in the past. In the country (Middle East) I’m living now, in the 1950s the people were actually living very basic, nomadic lives, and the grandparents were teaching their children. They didn’t have classrooms, you know, and that was our past not that long ago. Well, I don’t know about you, but, you know, why do we put children in school? And how many hours do you spend at school thinking: What am I doing here? Why are we learning this? I mean, I’m older than all of you, I’m sure, but we spent so many hours bored at school. The issue of learning how to do things, competence-building, is inherent in CLIL, and I think it’s a really important thing we need to go back to. And the problem there is examinations and there is a nice expression which somebody once said: “We need to measure what we value and not value what we measure.” At the moment, a lot of our exam systems are based on basically standardized exams and we need to change that. So I think competence-based education is one of the most powerful drivers for why we should look at alternative ways of teaching and learning. CLIL may be one of them. I appreciate the intellectual depth of the question, but it’s a really tricky one for me at this time of day. I need to think. But let’s have another one.

LM. OK. This one is easier. This question is about the role and the profile of CLIL teachers & students. In good CLIL lessons, students are learning content through a second language while learning the second language itself (almost without noticing) and learning to learn (which is one of the so-called key competences), and so their meta-linguistic (and meta-cognitive) awareness is also increased. CLIL poses a twofold challenge then: it represents a pedagogical challenge for teachers (who plan and deliver their lessons in a foreign language and are supposed to improve students’ linguistic and cultural competence in more than one language – their mother tongue and one or more foreign languages – as well as their capacity to learn on their own) and a cognitive challenge for students (who are expected to learn content subjects through a second language and the L2 itself at the same time). Of course, CLIL teachers need to have a good command of the second language; a precise knowledge of the content subject they teach; a familiarity with a wide range of strategies and techniques used in good practice in education in general (i.e., a knowledge of pedagogy, didactics and methodology, a knowledge of the art of teaching); a relational mind capable of making connections between different content subjects & building cross-curricular links; creativity & imagination; empathy (emotional intelligence) and problem-solving skills to manage classroom work successfully; and a capacity to cooperate, collaborate and negotiate with colleagues and students when coping with new challenges. In this sense, CLIL is, as you say, a rejuvenator for teachers with a true vocation for teaching, for teachers who love teaching, and so CLIL makes them feel energized. So, this question is about the role and profile of CLIL teachers and students alike. Which is the profile of a good CLIL teacher? What are the skills and knowledges CLIL teachers should have? What are students expected to do in a CLIL lesson? Which are the keys to success?

DM. I had the privilege of meeting someone recently who was a student of Piaget, Jean Piaget. This is going back quite a long time in life. I think, when I look at certain
successful teachers, they really don’t talk that much, you know. They really conduct an orchestra. I know this sounds like a cliché, but really they lay up the framework and they hand a job over to the kids, but they don’t feed them, and they give them high demands. So the whole notion of Vygotsky and zone of proximal development is very interesting indeed. And if you look at the impact on children’s learning from the work of John Hattie, having high expectations of students is a very very important issue. So we shouldn’t give them exercises that are too easy. We should give them tasks that are demanding but within reach – to stretch them but not lose them. To swim and not sink. If you look at the European profile for CLIL teacher education, which is available from the Council of Europe website, you will see the competences that a teacher needs: emotional intelligence about oneself, confidence, lack of cynicism, self-confidence… There are a number of issues which have nothing to do with traditional pedagogical knowledge, okay? I think we have a good idea of what a good CLIL teacher is, and that can be a language teacher or a content teacher.

LM. I love the idea that language as a universal faculty resembles a big tree, whose branches are the thousands of languages spoken by the 7 billion human beings living on Earth. In the context of this ecological, organic view of languages, I’m concerned about the future of human languages. David Crystal claims that the 1990s were an important decade that culminated in the celebration of 2001 as the European Year of Languages. In McLuhan’s Global Village, English is the undisputable lingua franca in the spheres of academic research, commerce & business, and the new information and communication technologies; there is an increased mobility of world population on a global scale, and language learning opens doors in the labour market; but also languages are to be learnt if we are to foster peace and solidarity in the world and to avoid conflicts & misunderstandings; languages should also be learnt just for the sake of pleasure, because they are the precious legacy of humanity. And yet many languages are dying really fast, the death of languages worldwide is a real threat, and we seem to be moving in the direction of a more globalized, homogenous world. In a fast-changing world, globalization is positive, but the other side to the coin is the disappearance of linguistic diversity. While we are witnessing a true democratization of language learning (bilingual or multilingual education is not a privilege belonging to the wealthy any more), we are witnessing the gradual disappearance of difference, the relentless death of human languages. What are the sociological reasons that account for the emergence of CLIL in education nowadays? How is CLIL being implemented in different European educational systems? What is the state of affairs regarding the research that is being carried out in the European context?

DM. Equity, equity, equity. You know, if you want to live in a world where you have lack of equality, which is certainly the case in some European countries, and it’s certainly an interesting issue here in Spain, you will have a break-down of society. If you want to look at a system which is really successful for all children, then you have high equity. And, as I said earlier, if you raise the bottom 20%, it has a positive knock-on effect all the way through the system. If you let those kids drop out and you give up on them and say They’re stupid or they can’t do this, it will contaminate the whole system. So I think that the linkage between equity and quality education is a major, major driver for success, and has been a river for CLIL. I wrote about that some years ago as a trans-European phenomenon, and got a sarcastic response by somebody who
argued: Oh, no, it’s clearly elitist. And I’m going: Now, hang on! Eating in this restaurant tonight is elitist, because we are fortunate enough to have the money to pay the bill, or I hope somebody is... If you look at trying to open up the equality for children in government federal schools or in some of these semi-private schools, then these things are happening all over the place, so this is the biggest move toward equity of language learning that I’ve ever seen, because in the old days I used to see countries where parents who had money would send their children to, for instance, Bournemouth to have a language course, you know, of three or four weeks. That was unequal for those parents who didn’t have the money, so I think the equity factor is still very very important. And if you look at the latest Eurydice 2012 report, which is not very detailed on CLIL, you’ll see that actually things are getting even more positive in this respect.

Teresa Gerdes: I agree.

LM. Well, we are witnessing a true democratization of language learning…

Francisco J. Blázquez: You know, most of the teachers in the course audience this afternoon work in private schools and most of the schools applying to be a part of the bilingual system are private. What is your opinion on that?

DM. I don’t quite understand your private schools, because I do understand they exist and I know that they are kind of private and yet they don’t charge fees and yet they have ways of asking for money. But it’s a curious phenomenon. Personally, I’m against promoting private education, you know, for a whole lot of reasons frankly. But, I don’t mind, if people what to pay for their education, all right, but then the state education should be as good as the private education, all right? That’s just the way it is. And then we have the problem, especially now, of politicians who look at ways of cutting money and they think: Well, teachers, education... We can cut money. And that is now one of the worse things that society can do. So what’s the Korean success story? Why is Korea investing so much money into education? Singapore, why? Finland? Because these are intelligent countries, and they are saying: We’ve got 20 years to raise the competence of so many citizens and we’ve got to do it now, otherwise we are stuffed. So I think the whole issue of equalitarianism is vital, powerful, it’s not just about ethics, it’s about survival actually.

Ana Calatayud: Some teachers phone me when I’m in my office and tell me about students with special needs. Well, some teachers think that these students are not able to follow CLIL. I always tell them: Well you can prepare materials for them, you can adapt the materials you use in your lessons for them. For instance, if you are working on animals, you can prepare alternative activities for these students. What do you think about this?

DM. OK, I knew nothing about special needs at one point in time, but then I got a letter, and it said: Would you like to apply for this amount of money to work for one and a half years running a special needs project? So I did it. I made the application and I got the contract. It was for the European Commission and I’m still proud of this report which consulted the whole spectrum of special needs in terms of languages mainly, and the results are fascinating. Now, the official rates for special needs are absolutely artificial
for loads of reasons which have nothing to do with education. The real rate for special needs is around 20% and the highest rates in Europe are in the north – Iceland, Norway, Finland, and so on –, probably because those countries realized that with special needs, if you intervene early, you can get very very good results. And it’s not a matter of labeling – you know, labeling is for bottles, not for people –, it’s a matter of understanding that human beings are complex and they need individualization. Now, Finland has done this fantastic thing by bringing a law that, from the very beginning of education, every child is examined, not in terms of having problems, you know, but for the sake of early differentiation. With special needs some people would say: Why would you bother teaching this child English when he can’t even speak Spanish properly? There’s plenty of evidence to show that learning a second language can be advantageous for a range of special education or specific education children. Specific education students probably amount to a further 20%. The real rate in our schools in Primary now across many European countries is more like 40% of children have specific or special needs. They may not know their mother tongue or first language, or they may have also other types of problems, so it’s a fascinating area and when you look at how they teach languages to different types of kids, CLIL-type provision is very very common. There’s a school in England where some of the most damaged young children, young adolescents, are placed, children who are taken away from their families. So these are some of the most damaged children in England. It’s in a place in Yorkshire. They introduced learning through CLIL through French for these kids. These kids were the lowest achievers you could imagine and they were so successful in learning French and learning the content, that they absolutely outperformed the clever, elitist grammar school kids. There are cases of children with severe dyslexia in their first language, English, who actually when they’re learning another language lose some of the problems of dyslexia. Maybe one reason being that English is one of the most difficult languages to learn as a second language because it’s so illogical, whereas Finnish may be one of the easiest languages to learn as a first language because it’s so logical. So there is a strong case for not excluding children and exclusion of children is done very commonly and often in the wrong way, and not in the best interests of children and society.

Ana Calatayud: Thank you.

DM. So if you want the report, I’ll be very happy to make sure we send that over…

Ana Calatayud: Yes, please.

Antonio R. Roldán: Let me say I’m very glad about what you have said because, when we had the first PISA results coming out in 2004 or 2005, I attended a seminar by the Finnish Minister of Education and he said the same as you have said. The more money you invest at the very beginning, the less money you have to invest at the end. There is no point in teaching special needs students when they are teenagers if you haven’t done the job when they were six. So it’s very important to invest, no matter how much you have to invest, when they are six and maybe to learn to read and write, literacy. I mean, when they are 14, if you haven’t done it…
DM. And there are so many reasons for doing it with languages. I mean, I’ve been in a Finnish school with children with severe blindness, so severe visual disablement, blind. The power, the self-confidence those youngsters have for being able to use English with other blind children in another country; the fact that they are in a youth culture and they are linked up is so profoundly important for them emotionally as human beings, so the knock-on effect of that is huge because their empowerment may then lead them to become really fully productive lives for themselves and for those around them, as opposed to just feeling wrong, disabled and useless. These doors would not have opened without language learning using appropriate methodologies. So there are loads of factors indeed. And this issue of attention deficit disorder, yeah it may be due to diet, it may be due to kids being driven around all the time, but also I think it is very due to young people being bored. Sometimes diagnosis can work against common sense, sometimes eagerness to label people produces myopic narrow-minded attitudes – sometimes people trying to do good end up causing harm. I like the idea that we all have specific needs at some points in our educational lives. I like the idea of an educational system that is geared to early identification, and, where necessary, early intervention. That is why I like the Finnish approach, because it places every child on different continuums during their development towards adulthood.

LM. We are almost finished now. This has to do with my next question, which is about the ethical implications of CLIL. What can CLIL achieve in the realms of social equity and inclusive education (mixed-ability & inclusion of learners with special and specific needs)? Can CLIL help us build a just and peaceful world, a fairer place where there is room for everybody? So this question is really about the ethical implications of CLIL in a broad sense, for to me education and ethics go hand in hand.

DM. If you create rich learning environments where the broadest range of children can achieve their potential, which is what we are trying to do actually in terms of additional language learning, then you are doing a good job. And yes, that’s what you’re setting out to achieve. It may take a long time, but you’re going in the right direction. For many teachers I have encountered, and according to the European Union support, this is an ethical-educational movement.

LM. The last question is the most personal question of all. After almost half a lifetime devoted to the study of language teaching and learning…

DM. Half a lifetime… Hang on a minute! How do you know my age? Sorry, carry on.

LM. After almost half a lifetime devoted to the study of language teaching and learning, what is the most elementary, essential lesson that you have learnt so far? What has life taught you and given to you as a human being committed to the well-being of humanity?

DM. I don’t feel I’m special enough to give an answer to a question like that, because I’m just like you, I’m just doing a job in education and doing the best I can in the circles that I’m in. Yes, I may be better known than you because my name is on the front of some books or whatever, but I think we can all make a difference. I just don’t feel I have a lot to say about that really. If anything, I am deeply appreciative of having had
20 years of working with fabulous people who want to make a difference, you know, a visible difference. And that has meant that when I go home and I feel: OK, I’ve been with good people and, yeah, maybe we haven’t achieved anything very much but we are going in the right direction, so that’s been a fantastic experience. And I think that’s been continued today actually as well. And that’s it.

LM. Thank you for your time, your generosity and your patience. I feel deeply honoured to have had the chance to talk to you, Dr. Marsh.

DM. Thank you very much.