

Interview - David Marsh

1. Can you tell us something about yourself?

I am based in Finland and for many years have been involved with educational transformation, particularly in additional language learning. This has involved assignments across the world, mainly in the European Union, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and more recently Latin America. I was instrumental in launching the term CLIL in the early 1990s as an educational technique for situations where students learn genuine subject matter in an additional language.

2. Why did the CLIL journey begin?

As the European Union expanded in the 1990s it faced a languages challenge. Large sections of society were stubbornly monolingual. Schools were failing to produce reasonable levels of language competence. With obvious exceptions, too many young people were leaving school with forms of language and communication deficit. The question on the table was if something could be done to bring more languages to more people.

Teaching subjects in an additional language, such as English-speaking students in a UK school studying geography through German, has been commonplace in some places for a long time. Such places often being found in border regions and elite academic schools.

Some of these schools and colleges were achieving high levels of excellence in dual or triple language educational types of education. A group of us wanted to see if we could leverage this excellence into mainstream education, and we set out to understand the dynamics of the change processes needed. We anticipated working our way through three phases: development, demonstration and then scale-up. The whole movement was driven at the grassroots, and actively supported by the European Commission. At that time VET was very much on our radar, especially for demonstration and scale-up.

Following the notion that *'if young people don't learn the way we teach, then we should teach the way they learn'*, we looked closely at how subjects are taught in academic education and VET. Finding plenty of potential for change, we set about constructing learning paths where students could simultaneously learn content and an additional language. We advocated a radical shake-up in how content is taught, and saw the potential of blending language and content as a successful formula.

This was the start of CLIL.

3. As a successful formula for whom?

Successful with the types of young people who have always excelled in language learning, but more importantly with those who have struggled with the traditional manner in which languages have been taught. When we learn a language we need to blend *learning the language*, with *learning about the language*, and *learning through the language*. It is the *learning through the language* that has been lacking in traditional approaches to language learning, and this is where CLIL is particularly strong.

CLIL can give a second language learning chance for students who had struggled earlier, particularly in terms of motivation and self-confidence. This is particularly relevant to VET where it is like learning to play a piano through having immediate hands-on access to the keyboard. Not in the way that I personally studied music which was hours of theory without a musical instrument in sight.

Think of Frank Zappa's '*the mind is like a parachute, it only works when it is open*'. In VET much of what we do with CLIL is to re-open the mind towards the 'can-do' in learning a language, and then providing a learning environment that supports a blend of both language acquisition and language learning. Students here in Switzerland will have a surprisingly large reservoir of latent knowledge of English. What CLIL can do here is to gently unleash this potential with youngsters who prefer '*to use as they learn and learn as they use*' as is so often the case in VET, not to '*learn now for use later*'.

4. What about the teachers and instructors?

Teachers also embrace the idea of innovation through integration, which some would argue leads to inspiration. Changing the language of instruction is a major eye-opener for good VET teachers, and engagement with CLIL is often very well received. It appears to create a backwash effect where the initial challenge of changing languages feeds pedagogical awareness, which then benefits teaching in the first language.

Think of it is like going through an intense physical exercise regime at the gym. Tiresome at first, but something that can lead to unexpected surprises.

4. What types of teachers are competent to teach through CLIL?

To answer this we first need to ask *why* is English being used for teaching and learning in a Swiss VET college? Then *what* type of model is being operated? There is no single blueprint that can be imported from one country into another, or even from one college to another in the same country. When we have the answers to the *why* and *what*, then we can turn to the teachers.

First and foremost teaching through CLIL has to be voluntary. Secondly, a teacher needs to have a genuine desire to explore ways to enrich teaching by blending it with an additional language. In third place is the level of fluency that the teacher has in the language itself. It may seem counter-intuitive but this formula is very important for VET. Mistakes are made when this is handled in a reverse way where up-front focus is on the language fluency levels of the teacher.

This is particularly relevant in VET where the content teacher is not a language teacher, and not acting in the role of being a model speaker of the language. In terms of demanding specific levels of linguistic fluency at the outset I am reminded of a Finnish VET teacher talking about the optimal level of fluency required in English to work with CLIL. He told me “you don’t have to be a diamond to shine. Glass shines too”.

What is important is that the teacher is willing to explore methods to make the learning of content successful, and has an appropriate professional and communicative competence. There are many VET teachers who will have developed their language skills in working life through learning-by-doing. This experience, and the language skills developed, is a key competence when teaching through CLIL in VET.

5. You mentioned that you prefer the term CLIL to Bili.

CLIL is the process, not the event. The event might be a 20 hours course on electrical maintenance health and safety taught partially through English (in order that the students are fully conversant with international safety standards in English). If Bili is used to refer to the methods used for teaching and learning, then fine. But if Bili is used to suggest the post-event learning outcomes, then there may be a problem because it is so closely linked to the word bilingual.

Bilingual is a loaded term. It can lock people into making assumptions and having false expectations. It also invites unnecessary controversy. We need a term to describe the key, not the lock, and I think that CLIL serves this purpose well.

6. What are the driving forces that are now making CLIL go global?

These have evolved over the past years. The demand for higher proficiency in English language has always been significant. But as understanding of the potential of the methodologies spread so languages other than English are increasingly being used for CLIL. So, one major driver is additional language learning.

Secondly, there is the question of improving the learning of other subjects. Just as skill rhymes with CLIL, so CLIL has great potential for VET. Counterintuitive as it may seem, improving the teaching of other subjects by learning them through a second/foreign language is also a significant driver.

Thirdly, research from the educational neurosciences on the benefits of having two or more languages active in the environment is an important player.

Fourthly is the impact of digital devices on young people in this technologically dominated information age. The minds and brains of this generation are being profoundly affected through using digital devices that they are becoming restless with poor educational practices. CLIL activities are particularly suitable in adjusting to the aspirations and preferred learning paths of these young people.

Finally, there is the need to develop 21st century education especially in terms of competence-based learning outcomes and life skills. We did not know it at the time but now 25 years later, CLIL fits this particular shoe very smoothly.

7. So as you leave now what are your thoughts?

Teachers are front-line experts and teaching is a tough job. CLIL offers a prime example of what those involved with innovation can achieve in their schools, and for administrators and societal representatives is in line with equipping young people with relevant communicative competences in the spirit of 'our education today being our economy tomorrow'.

The finest CLIL teachers are those who are passionate about wanting to make a difference through enhancing the educational and personal development of their students. Raising the relevance of VET curricula, and wanting to equip students with the best possible start-up competences, is probably why CLIL seems to attract some of the very best teachers.

These teachers have to believe in what they do, and they have to be believed in. What they need is freedom to experiment, guidance through some form of coaching, access to quality resources, and a lifting of barriers that inhibit professional adaptability, and ultimately change.

The jewel in the crown of VET professional development in CLIL is evidence of the outcomes that can be achieved. Accessing evidence of good practice, building localized practices, and using this to inform practice drives successful college development. When best practice is embedded within a college and carried out by small groups of teachers, conversation, connection, and creation of small-scale cross-cutting learning experiences can bring surprisingly positive results.

Thank you