

**FOSTERING THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
THROUGH A CONTENT-RICH APPROACH**

**EL FOMENTO DE LA COMPETENCIA COMUNICATIVA A
TRAVÉS DE TAREAS BASADAS EN CONTENIDO**

ANA GARCÍA ANTÓN

anaggaa.2@gmail.com

UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

MARIONA GURRI ROMA

nonastress@yahoo.es

UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

HELGA MARTÍNEZ CIPRÉS

helga.maci@gmail.com

UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

Keywords: content-rich teaching unit, teamwork, positive interdependence, English as a foreign language, communicative competence

Palabras clave: unidad didáctica basada en contenidos, trabajo en equipo, interdependencia positiva, inglés como lengua extranjera, competencia comunicativa

As far as the teaching-learning of English as a second language, the current curriculum in the Catalan educational system regards the communicative competence as one of its landmarks. It also advocates for the transversality of the key competences. *A Trip Back to Ancient Greece* (Fig.1) is a teaching sequence designed as a content-rich teaching unit with the ultimate purpose of fostering the communicative competence amongst second language learners. Content, hence, becomes the driving force of the use of

English as the vehicular language in the classroom. The main concern and challenge of the teachers was to create an environment where learners would feel at ease to use English as a means to communicate. Bearing this in mind, the authors prepared an arsenal of activities as instruments to achieve this goal. Thus, the starting point of this experience was to provide students with as many tools as possible in order to facilitate the use of English when they were on-task during teamwork.

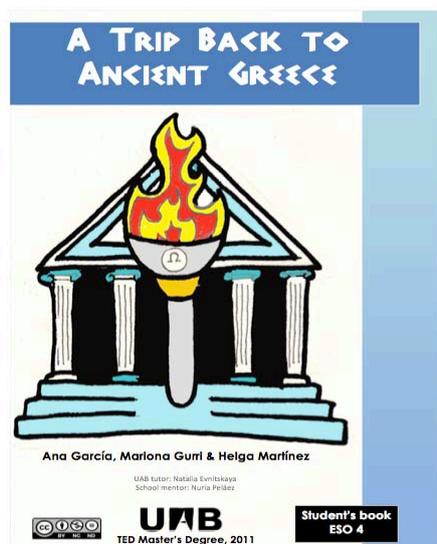


Fig.1. Teaching unit cover

The experience took place in a school located in a small Catalan town eighteen kilometres away from Barcelona city. The lessons were given in a class of fifteen and sixteen-year-olds in their fourth year of obligatory secondary education (ESO). *A Trip Back to Ancient Greece* is a teaching unit based on the curriculum of History, and adapted for its implementation in the English as a second language lessons. Although the students' English proficiency was seemingly heterogeneous, in general it corresponded to an A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Most of them, born in Catalonia, had as their mother tongues both Catalan and Spanish and they all came from similar social backgrounds.

As aforementioned, the main target of this teaching experience was to foster the use of English as a means to communicate. It was thought that cooperation and interaction would have to be two major milestones of this experience, so it was decided that they would play a very important role. *A Trip Back to Ancient Greece* is an interactive approach to learning the ancient Greek civilization. It aims at providing a

first insight into this historic period in order to further the learners' understanding of its culture and relevance up until our days. The sequence promotes learners' communication skills through a wide range of supporting materials. It should be pointed out that the cornerstone of this unit is to foster learners' acquisition of English as a second language, as well as the content, through collaborative and cooperative learning activities. In order to keep this balance between content and language, all the tasks were preceded by a warm-up activity that led students to focus on the lesson-related concepts to later facilitate the development of the content-based tasks.

To provide a general view of the experience in question, two of the tasks implemented will be put forward in this article. The first of these activities was the jigsaw task (Kagan, 1985), which aimed to approach the basic characteristics of the ancient Greek society and, at the same time, to enhance positive interdependence and group cohesion amongst learners. It is noteworthy that teams were heterogeneous as far as their language competence level was concerned, as well as their different learning and working abilities. Each member of the teams was in charge of becoming an expert on one of four different subtopics of the lesson, so as to be able to explain it later to the rest of the members in their teams (Fig.2). The second task consisted in writing a collaborative summary, in which students had to sum up the notes they had jotted down during a previous listening activity. The task involved identifying the main ideas of the different parts of the ancient Greek city. The notes had to be transformed into a full written production containing all the highlighted important points. This meant to help students to learn about how to work collaboratively towards a common goal.

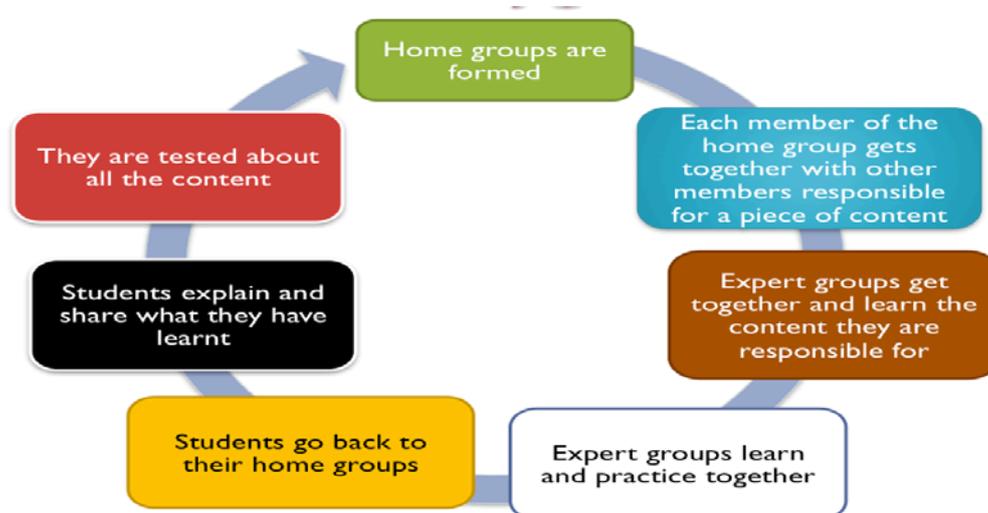


Fig.2. Phases of the jigsaw task

In relation to the concern that language could hamper the acquisition of content of the teaching sequence, the latter was thoroughly embedded into linguistic scaffolding. As a result, the overall appraisal was that content was successfully attained. Another important outcome was that the construction of knowledge had been built collaboratively among students. Furthermore, in some occasions it was observed that during the development of content-based tasks students would discuss on their own about English language features, without a previous request. The fact that teams were heterogeneous was an advantage for the better acquisition of both content and language, given that the members in the teams adopted the roles of experts and non-experts (Evnitskaya & Aceros, 2008) according to the needs of each task.

At the end of the implementation of the teaching unit, it was observed that it lacked a more elaborated final project, which required the retrieval of the content and the language of the whole sequence. Taking advantage of the terminology used previously, it is worth drawing a parallelism between the jigsaw task, in which learners had to join all the pieces together to give meaning to the overall content, and the aggregate of tasks in the sequence. Thence, it would be interesting to corroborate whether or not students not only acquire the content *per se*, but also connect the different pieces of the entire unit to grasp both a global idea and a detailed insight into the ancient Greek civilization. Nevertheless, after the completion and assessment of the tasks, the conclusions that can be drawn from this experience point out that content and language were acquired both in parallel and systematically. Although designing a content-rich unit from scratch calls for the involvement of different teaching experts, which can turn out into an obstacle, the results obtained made this experience worthwhile and encouraging for further practices.

References

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