

# **CLIL Community of Students: a Longitudinal Project for Developing Content-Based Material within a Learning Community in Primary Education**

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## **Abstract**

This paper outlines the rationale for and the purpose of designing and implementing a content-based project that was based on the principles of the Learning communities approach. This programme was developed and applied by students of the ST' class of a primary school, who cooperated in order to develop educational teaching material in English as a Foreign Language for the students of the D' class of the primary school. This intervention was implemented to 300 students of a Greek primary school. The basic characteristics of the project were the diversity of linguistic expertise among the participants, a shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and language skills, an emphasis on learning how to learn, and the mechanisms for sharing what is learned. The students took on the responsibility to develop educational material and help the teacher teach a module of the school subject "Environmental Studies" in the target language (English) to the students of the D' class using the material they developed. In order to examine the effectiveness and feasibility of the project, an evaluation study was conducted by using: a) a pre- and post- language/content test administered individually to the children; and b) journal kept by both the teacher and the students throughout the project. It was evident that during this two-year programme (2012-13 & 2013-14), students developed their language, metacognitive & metalinguistic skills through advancing content and language knowledge while students were able to direct their own language learning, work with and listen to other speakers, and develop ways of dealing with complex issues and problems that required different kinds of linguistic expertise

**Keywords:** CLIL, learning community, content-based learning, foreign language

JEL Classification: O30, Z11

## **Introduction**

Learning communities are receiving a significant attention owing to the fact that the idea of a "Learning Community" has been proposed as an alternative approach to the traditional teaching (Wilson & Ryder, 1996). This approach "criticizes" the traditional forms of communication between the teacher and the student (Roth, 1998, in Pringle, 2002) seeing the change of the teacher's role into

facilitator and colleague for the knowledge acquisition. The forerunner of this approach dates back to the 1920s when the philosopher and education theorist Alexander Meiklejohn introduced an experimental programme at the University of Wisconsin (Smith, 2001) while the idea was given emphasis during the 1960s and 1980s with the aim of humanizing the learning environment and enhancing students development.

The term "learning community" has been already defined in various ways. According to Oxford Dictionary "*community is a group of people who share the same religion, race, job, etc*"...or "*the feeling of sharing things and belonging to a group in the place where you live*". It could be supported that a learning community at school is a group of students with the common aim of enhancing and sharing knowledge, they are willing to support the community and non members and they are valued for their various contribution establishing an environment in which learning is of major importance (Papadopoulos & Griva, 2014). In such an environment, students develop their meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic skills while there is much of boost in the mater of relationships among the members of this community.

There have been stated many key elements to be included when designing a learning community programme. The classrooms have been changing to be in accordance with the needs and demands of the students and the world respectively, but the learning communities classrooms differ to a fair extend from most classrooms according to the findings of Bielaczyc & Collins (2009) in the following elements a) The goals of the community which are related to the enhancement of the collective knowledge through the personal development; b) Learning activities which are totally different from the activities of an ordinary school classroom since students constitute the main factor that designs and works towards the smooth completion of each activity; c) Teacher's roles and power relationships that are developed in a class because the role of a teacher has changed rapidly (Papadopoulos, 2014) there is a pass from the teacher as a knowledge source to the teacher as a facilitator of the learning process in which students are in the center; d) Students' roles and power have also changed and differ from most classrooms because students have been turned into key-factors of the learning process completion; Students work toward enhancing and sharing knowledge to the benefit of every community member and non member; They are valued for their different expertise and they develop their skills and their power in the learning process from the phase in which there were the receiver of the knowledge to the phase in which they are the producers of the knowledge; e) Resources are also different because students can use materials from internet, newspapers even from their everyday life. These resources are very important in the learning and teaching process because of the fact that they are in accordance with the students' inclinations and interests so they can actually motivate students and engage them in communicative circumstances; f) Knowledge that is produced by students is not planned to be restricted within the community context. One of the goals of the community is to share the knowledge and students are armed with the sense of sharing whatever they produce, they discover, they learn with every member of the society and every person who is interested in it and g) Products which is in fact

### **The Content and Language Integrated Learning**

The CLIL approach is a very popular approach for both language and content knowledge development in Europe and all over the world. When approaching CLIL, students are taught a curriculum subject through a foreign language, fact that can contribute greatly to the objectives of the content with respect to language learning. The most common form involves applying CLIL programs at school for teaching different school subjects or modules through a foreign language. What, however, is given special attention is that CLIL teaching requires a dual-focused teaching, which means on the one hand the teaching of a subject (eg geography, history, religion, etc.) and on the other hand the overall language development of students in a foreign language.

The CLIL is a medium of promoting the teaching of foreign languages. The participation of students in a class, applying the CLIL approach entails substantial enhancement of the exhibition of students in the foreign language, as the environment of CLIL tends to multiply the hours spent in the target language in comparison to the traditional methods of language teaching (Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2007; Papadopoulos & Griva, 2014). Also, learning the language through content gives a real opportunity for students to learn academic skills and develop their critical thinking, benefits which would not only be beneficial for the learning of foreign language students, but also dynamic "equipments" for the students' success (Troncale, 2002). Moreover, CLIL integrates the theory of Krashen (1982) according to which there is a significant achievement of the acquisition of a second/foreign language when the student receives understandable input, in contrast with the pressure on memorizing vocabulary and accumulation of grammatical and vocabulary rules.

A very important advantage of CLIL, beyond the linguistic benefits is the multicultural awareness. CLIL promotes intercultural awareness and helps students to understand people with different cultural backgrounds and to promote the development of intercultural communication skills can be realized (Christ, 2002 by Paul II., John S. &., 2008; Papadopoulos & Griva, 2014). Finally, through its activities and teaching materials promote acquaintance with other peoples, cultures and mentalities.

Through the implementation of CLIL programs, the student is asked to deal with the information of a subject from different perspectives. Thus, students who participate in CLIL classes demonstrate a significant improvement in gaining the content knowledge of a particular school subject (Grabe & Stoller, 1997, Stoller, 2004, Serra, 2007).

The CLIL approach relates to all languages but in fact, most applications (eg Finland, Austria, Spain) focus on English which is undeniably the lingua franca. Finally, studies (Papadopoulos & Griva 2014; Griva et al, 2014a; Paulou & Georgiou, 2010) have shown that the implementation of CLIL programs to students is full of advantages associated with all-round development of students while showing the great need of substantial students' involvement in the education by applying such methods.

## **The proposed project**

### **Rationale and objectives of the project**

During the current era, the question that arose is related to the impact of content-based programmes and the learning communities approach in the language acquisition of students. They have brought about countless advantages, which are not related only to the language development of students in a foreign language but they are really useful in the development of social, cognitive and post cognitive skills of students.

Nevertheless, there is no research carried out about students developing material and teaching a content in the foreign language following the principles of the "Learning communities approach" and this resulted in conducting this research. More specifically, the present study attempted to investigate the efficacy and potential advantages of students' developing material and implementing a content-based programme based on the principles of the learning communities in English language to teach part of a school subject to students of D' classes.

In addition, the research questions which had been posed are:

- a) Will the participation of students in developing material for a program with the theme "Greek civilization" and English as the language of instruction contribute to the development of students in English as a foreign language?
- b) Will the participation of students in developing materials for a program with the theme 'Greek civilisation" and English as the language of instruction contribute to the development of historical knowledge of students?

### **Implementation Procedures**

The experimental intervention was applied to students of a Greek public elementary school, aiming at the development of English as a foreign language and to obtain a plurality of individual objectives fostering of a learning community through a content-based programme. This project was implemented as an additional after school activity in which students from primary schools of Larissa took part after the permission of their parents in a try of the local authority of Larissa to offer English language lessons to students of the city free of charge, so this project constituted a pilot programme, the results of which could be used for further volunteer action and offer. The students of this project were chosen on the basis of taking students from as many schools as possible so that we can have students from different backgrounds and armed with different perspectives. The students who were selected were students who could reach the teaching center of the experimental intervention in Omorfochori Larissa and the researcher/teacher came into contact with the parents of the students before he chose the students. It is also worth mentioning that the teacher had no prior relationship with the students and their parents but they asked for the permission from the school principals.

In this learning-communitiy programme, there was a culture of learning, collaboration and a constructive environment full of incentives. Special emphasis was given to diverse expertise, the problem solving and the sharing of knowledge and skills among the members which made learning process visible and articulated.

In the first phase, the teacher informed the students of the ST' class about the syllabus of the specific module that was going to be taught. They discussed the content of the module with each other and all the class expressed views and ideas about the possible material that could be produced and used. Particular emphasis was given to the language of the target module so that the students would be able to deal with it and some of its special characteristics (i.e terminology, special patterns, idioms etc.). Indeed, the teacher distributed a handbook of the necessary syllabus of the D' class as far as the English language knowledge is concerned, so that the students would know the appropriate language and the demands and needs of the students of the target class. This phase of the project was completed within 5 teaching sessions which lasted for 50' minutes each.

In the second stage, students were working toward developing their material for the D' class students. More specifically, they started developing material, discussed the opinions expressed by the other classmates and they worked creatively. They used the pictures as incentives for the lessons and they edited passages and articles. They also created digital games using the software of Hotpotatoes such as Matches, crosswords, questions of multiple choices. These activities were created to check the content understanding and the level of language learning. They also created constructions related to the module such as "Traditional dresses", "Old items", "Embroideries", "Old house machines" etc. They recorded traditional Greek dances and songs and they created Power Point slides for each sub-unit of the module. The material they produced aimed at helping the students of the D' class of the primary school to develop both their knowledge in the content "Greek Civilisation" and in the foreign language (English) as well. Throughout this phase, students discussed the material, their digital exercises and everything they did with the teacher/researcher, they took notes and they interacted with their classmates in the target language English. After each teaching/working meeting, the students and the teacher reflected on the work done, written in their journals and orally in the discussions taken place. In fact, they tried to simulate a teaching hour of the unit they worked on so that they could check if there was a gap in the teaching or a difficulty or a factor they did not take into account. The duration of the teaching sessions that were demanded for the completion of this stage was 60' minutes each.

In the next stage, a group of students (the member changed from sub-unit to sub-unit) helped the teachers teach the specific sub-unit to the students in English while the other classmates helped both them and the students of the D' class when needed. Meanwhile, they were taking notes in order to discuss them with the teaching group after each lesson. During a teaching hour of this intervention, the students analysed texts, they showed the educational material to students in order to incite discussion in the foreign language while students were asked to deal with the digital exercises and educational games that the students of the St' class developed for this purpose. In the last part of the teaching process the students worked on their PCs noting the things that they enjoyed most in the specific teaching hour and the problems they may have had. The students who helped the teacher of course, kept their journals after their lesson in order to discuss their notes with their classmates after the lesson in their arranged meeting. So, the notes of the students and the teachers were discussed in way that student reflected on their work, their material, their language skills' needs during the lesson and everything they noted

about possible problems students of the D' class faced regarding the content of the sub-unit. As it is obvious, the teaching sessions duration was 45' minutes like the teaching hours at school while students of the St' class participated in 30-minute- sessions in which they reflected on the lessons delivered and the materials they developed.

**The sub-units of the Module "Greek Civilisation" are:**

1. Civilisation: a map of words

*Students were given the opportunity to participate in inquiry activities and find out the parts that the A civilisation consists of as well as to realise the importance of each part.*

2. The Greek Civilisation in brief

*In this phase, students were introduced into the Greek civilisation through their active engagement and the game-based activities they developed and were involved during the project.*

3. Our culture (myths and legends, customs and traditions, Song and Dances of our country, Folk art)

*Each part of a culture were discovered by the students. They had the opportunity to look for myths and legends of Greece such as the "Bridge of Arta", the customs and traditions such as "Gourounohara", they recorded songs like "Kontoula Lemonia (Short Lemon tree)" and they danced the traditional dances of Greece like "Sirtaki" while their touch with the folk art was an important characteristic of the project.*

4. A discussion with the civilisation: The museum, a house for the civilisation

*The museum as a house for the civilisation was an important part of the project because the participants were given the opportunity to realise the significance of a museum, the different kinds of museums in Greece while their continuous touch with cultural exhibits gave them the chance to gain much knowledge about the Greek culture.*

5. Religion monuments of our country

*The religion monuments were another significant part of our project where students analysed and dealt with monuments of religion importance. They connected them with the Greek history and they realised their importance.*

6. From Civilisation to Civilisation (buildings, statues, dances, towers, music and musical instruments, languages, sports)

*The last unit of the project was devoted to the differences among the civilisations. It was not about different countries but even about different ages of Greece and different places of Greece. Every place has its own civilisation and cultural characteristics. Students through their engagement had the opportunity to discover them and compare them.*

***Special objectives of the project***

In particular, there were linguistic, cognitive and social - emotional goals, which are:

Linguistic objectives

The upper and D' class students to develop and cultivate the perceptive language skills (Listening and Reading) as well as the productive ones (Writing and Speaking) in English as a foreign language, using language as a medium of communication in authentic situations.

Cognitive objectives

The students

a) to learn about the Greek civilisation and the parts it consists of using the English language, and following a content based approach in a holistic teaching and learning approach

Emotional - social objectives

Students:

- a) to direct their own language learning
- b) to work with and listen to other people
- c) to develop ways of dealing with complex issues and problems that required different kinds of expertise
- d) to share the objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge
- e) to give emphasis on learning how to learn and share what is learned.
- f) to use their imagination to achieve their goals.
- g) To develop curiosity and diversity.

**Participants**

The participants of this intervention were divided into two groups, the students of the St' class and the students of the D' class and they were chosen on the basis of their ability to come to the center where the project took place. In cases that many students were able to, the researcher chose randomly students from each school. The first were the students who developed the educational material and helped the teacher teach the specific units to the "students of the D' class". The students of the D' class were the students that were offered the material and the content-based instruction. Both the groups of the St class and the D' class consisted of 300 students each who were students of various primary schools in Larissa. Students were enrolled in various primary schools in the prefecture of Larissa and gathered in the Cultural Center of Omorfochori. It is worth noting that all the children were native Greek language speakers and they were learning English as a foreign language and that the teaching intervention was implemented during the school years 2012-13 and 2013-2014.

**Evaluation of the effectiveness and feasibility of the project**

In order to evaluate the effect of educational intervention in which followed the principles of -the Learning community approach in a content-based programme developed and applied by students, and to determine whether the objectives chosen a priori were achieved, two methodological tools were used, a pre-test to the "Students of the St' class" and the "D' class" before and after the intervention and journals kept by the teacher/researcher and the students throughout the duration of the intervention.

Regarding the pre- and post-test, it consisted of questions and activities that assessed both the English language learning level of students and their content knowledge gain. As this intervention was based on the content that was taught in a foreign language, it was a dual focused project and as such, the students were required to be evaluated in these two fields. Indeed, in the pre- and the post- test, students were asked to choose the correct answer in multiple choice activities, crosswords and matches that demanded both language and content level.

As for the journal, it aimed at the students' behaviour during the intervention, their interactions and their participation in the

learning process. The recording of the journal took place at the end of each instruction, while the structure was based on "questions to guide reflection journal entries of Richards & Lockhart (Richards, J. & Lockhart, C., 1994: 16 -17). It is worth noting that the questions of the diary were based on three areas

**a) questions about instruction**

1. What objectives did I set? To what extent did I achieve them?
2. What teaching material did I use? How effective were the teaching aids?
3. What forms of communication among students and the teacher were used?

**b) questions about students' attitude and participation**

1. Which was the students' attitude at the beginning, middle and at the end of each activity? How did I react?

**c) questions about the general estimation of the instruction.**

- 1) What went well and what did not? Why?
- 2) What could I change? Why

## Results

For data processing the pre-test and the post-test, there used the statistical package SPSS for Windows.

### Profile of the sample

This experimental intervention involved a sample of 300 students of the sixth and fourth grade of primary schools of Larissa. The Table 1.1 presents the distribution of students by gender. Essentially, the students of the St' class consisted of 170 girls and 130 boys, while the D' class group consisted of 155 girls and 145 boys.

**Table 1.1: Distribution of students by gender - St' class students**

Gender	N	Percentage
Male	130	43%
Female	170	57%
Total	300	100%

**Table 1.2: Distribution of students by gender - D' class students**

Gender	N	Percentage
Male	145	48%
Female	155	52%
Total	300	100%

### Results of the pre- and post- test

During the pre- and post- test, the students were given a test with language and content knowledge activities so that the students can be evaluated in the target language the content knowledge. The following tables present the sets of the correct answers for each student for the St' and D' class students as well as the mean scores and the standard deviation. It is worth mentioning that the pre- and post-test of the each class were different because of the different level of the students of the St' class and the D' class. Both the students of the St' class as well as the students of the D' class showed a better performance in their answers after the intervention to a high extent.

Based on the students' answers, the following table 2.1 presents the mean scores and the standard deviation of the correct answers of students of St' class in the pre- and the post- test. A clear improvement in their correct answers is revealed in the post test (mean score: 45) compared with the pre- test one (mean score: 21,95).

**Table 2.1: Mean Scores and Std. Deviation of St' Class students**

	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation
Pre Test	21,95	5,72
Post Test	45	6,68

The correct answers of the students of the D' class as presented in the above table led to the creation of the following one, Table. 2.2 Which presents the mean scores and the standard deviation of the D' class students. As it is also obvious, they demonstrated a better performance in the post test (mean score: 35,55) if it is compared with their initial performance (mean score: 19,25).

**Table 2.2: Mean Scores and Std. Deviation of D' Class**

	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation
Pre Test	19,25	5,990123
Post Test	35,55	6,924214

## Journal

### *Teacher/Researcher's Journal*

The analysis of the journal notes taken by the researcher/teacher showed that the intervention was successful. To be specific, the group cooperative learning was developed among the students and they interacted with each other that led them to active learning processes and of course a meaningful learning. Indeed, journals extracts "students were positive toward the development of materials. They collaborated with each other to create digital games through the hotpotatoes programme while some others were responsible for the arts crafts as visual motivation for the students". The students who developed the teaching material for the students of the D' class were characterized by joy, incentives and mainly the use of the target language throughout the procedures of the learning community. They developed teaching and learning material that is necessary for the multisensory learning of the students. Also, recordings as "Their continuous communication in English was a surprise for me today. I did not expect the students to start communicating in English so soon, but they wrote in English and they discussed in the target language" revealed that students' participation and their active involvement led them to continually develop their four language skills in English as a foreign language as well their critical abstract and critical thinking acting as valued members of the learning community for the sake of the knowledge enhancement. As for the students of the D' class, they had the opportunity to deal with materials and activities designed by their elder classmates. They were introduced in an environment where

the culture of learning is obvious while the journals showed that the materials helped the students develop their language skills and enhance their content knowledge *"the students seemed to understand certain concepts of this lessons through the material of their classmates. They were very positive and willing to learn while they shows their preference in the digital games and videos"*.

### **Students' Journal**

The analysis of the students' journal indicated surprising results. Both the students of the St' class as well as the students of the D' class seemed to have enjoyed this educational programme based on the principles of the learning communities. They reflected on their lessons and the materials *"it was very interesting to reflect on the material we developed. It was a unique experience because we were like a teacher and we realized how difficult and careful we should be"* Through the analysis of the journal, it became obvious that students developed their thinking and their talents, inclinations and their interests. The materials produced by the St' class students proved to be addressed to the interests and the references of the D' class students. Through their notes, it was shown that students developed their metacognitive abilities and they managed to direct their own learning in a learning community context *"by producing this material for our classmates, I was thinking all the time about its correctness; I wrote in English and then I returned and checked if what I had read was right and helpful for my classmates and for the other students. In this way, I understood how we can learn something because I was thinking how the other students could learn and benefit from my material"* Their diverse expertise which has been continually valued encouraged them to try to create and offer to the whole school benefit.

The qualitative analysis of the journal entries led to the creation of four typologies: a) teaching process, b) teacher's role, c) student's attitude and d) overall evaluation of the pilot intervention encompassing a number of categories and subcategories (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Journal Records**

<i>Typologies</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Subcategories</i>
A) Teaching Process	1.Goals	i. development of linguistic skills
		ii. development of social skills and strategies
		iii. time management
	2. Techniques	i. inquiry-learning activities
		ii. dialogue
		iii. discussion/ debate
		iv. brainstorming
		v. teaching with multimedia
	3.Aids	i. posters, maps
		ii. books
		iii. information technologies
		viii. materials (plasticine, colorful cardboard)

	4. Work in class	i. pair work
		ii. group work
		iii. working individually
		iv. cooperation between teacher-class
B) Teacher's Role	5. Communication in class	i. use of mother tongue (L1)
		ii. use of foreign language (FL)
		iii. nonverbal communication
	6. Providing Assistance	i. encouragement
		ii. instructions for the activities
		iii. scaffolding
		iv. organizing students' work according to their interests
		v. differentiated activities
		vi. creative activities
C) Student's Attitude	7. Students' Behavior	i. learning as a pleasurable experience
		ii. interest for inquiry learning activities
		iii. participation during teamwork
	8. Participation	i. participation in creative activities (handicrafts)
		ii. participation in experiential activities
D) Overall Evaluation	9. Problems Encountered	i. cooperation problems among students
		ii. students' difficulty regarding receptive skills
		iii. students' difficulty regarding productive skills
	10. Learning Outcome	i. use of target language for communication
		ii. acquiring context-specific vocabulary
		iii. social skills development
		iv. inquiry skills development
		v. self- and peer-assessment skills development
		vi. use of information

		technologies during learning
		vii. pleasurable learning

## Conclusion

It is true, according to this research results that the intervention in which students act in a learning community for the language skills development and the content knowledge enhancement was highly successful. Students showed a major interest thanks to the innovative way of working and learning that motivated them towards language development both in the classroom and outside the school environment. The issues dealt with by the participants were foregone by the Environmental Studies and specifically to the topic of "Greek Civilisation" in order to be related to students' interests. In addition, students were given the opportunity to work in groups, interact, help their classmates and adopt democratic ways for their rights in the classroom and demonstrate the importance of learning from those he works with (Krechevsky & Stork, 2000).

The use of multimedia in every meeting as well as the encouragement of pupils for participation in experiential type activities was a new experience for them in the classroom while learning English as a foreign language. They achieved language mediation conditions through their developing material activities while they managed to develop their social skills, their autonomy and their capacity for lifelong learning. So it could be argued that the multisensory learning achieved its goal (Favorini et al., 2011, 2012). In fact, studies have indicated that games with all the multisensory activities that demands in the language class enhance students' communicative skills and provide opportunities for holistic language development (Griva & Semoglou, 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009, Papadopoulos et al., 2012).

Learning communities proved to be very beneficial for the language skills development as well as for the development of meta-cognitive abilities and abilities of students to direct their own learning and reflect on through their journal notes and the continuous teacher's feedback. It is true that the feedback has the ability to promote and boost the language learning of students and generally it has a positive influence on learning (Papadopoulos & Peiou, 2014). Besides the positive cognitive effects, students of the two classes showed a significant preference and satisfaction throughout the educational intervention. Moreover, the peers interaction and the continuous encouragement both from the teacher and the other classmates help them gain confidence and desire to learn a foreign language and enhance their knowledge in a subject and their cultural sensitivity. Indeed, through engaging students in content-based activities, they enhanced their historical and cultural understanding (Korosidou & Griva, 2014). So, they had the opportunity to develop their cultural awareness and understand the language by using it in circumstances with "meaning" and to conquer simultaneously by learning the language, language skills and its content (Huyen, 2003). In fact, competence in communicative skills was also revealed in many previous studies conducted with content-based FL/L2programmes. (Hüttner & Rieder-Bünemann, 2010, Maillat, 2010, Mewald, 2007, Moore, 2009).

It would be of major importance that teacher implement cross-thematic projects in the context of the learning communities because as shown from this research, it can be very beneficial for their holistic development. Teachers can implement longitudinal projects and interventions to students to their and their education benefit.

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## Appendix

Digital games developed by students

*Complete the crossword and learn about the Minos Palace*

**Minos Palace**

**Clues**

**Across**

2. Who designed the Minos Palace?
4. In the palace, there were many rooms around a central...
5. Minos Palace is also known for Ariadne's ball of...

**Down**

1. The ... of the city by Mycenaean destroyed the palace.
3. Where is the Minos Palace located?
- 5.

*Poseidon has become very angry with Athena's victory and has changed the right order of the following words. Help Gooddness Athena overcome this problem. You have to collect 2ipoints (1 point x each correct word)*

praotn .....  
covyitr .....  
letmpe .....  
plortcsu .....  
roviy .....