

A REVIEW OF ‘PPP’

DAVID EVANS, University of Birmingham, December 1999

1. Introduction

Current thinking in Second Language Acquisition suggests that ‘Presentation, Practice, Production’ (PPP) approach is totally unjustifiable as a means of teaching. However it not only persists but seems to flourish. It is a methodology about which passions run high with Michael Lewis (1996:9) writing ‘the fact is that the PPP paradigm is, and always was, nonsense’ and Long (1998:136) condemning deductive teaching as ‘neanderthal teaching practices’. Despite academics being united on the fact that learning does not take place the way that the PPP methodology supposes (Willis1996), and despite Task Based Learning (TBL) seemingly ready to fill the void with a model consistent with SLA theory, PPP is not being abandoned as SLA researchers would wish.

PPP is not being defended on a theoretical basis, for it does not seem to have one that can be defended, but there is a growing army of dissenters (Swan, Seedhouse, Foster, Sheen, Halliday) who can point to flaws and contradictions in supposed superior models such as the ‘Communicative’ approach and TBL and question whether the alternatives are in fact better than PPP. PPP has its defenders, not in academia but in the classroom, and ultimately it is the teacher who needs to be convinced that PPP is a spent force. There are other reasons for the survival of PPP, perhaps most importantly resistance to change. This essay will attempt to identify the key failings of PPP and to explain why this does not stop its use.

2 PPP

Pinpointing exactly what PPP is not as easy as it sounds, and is perhaps one of the reasons why it endures. A traditional PPP class is quite straightforward, but it seems that PPP has evolved over the years, cherry picking the more attractive elements of other approaches, and incorporating them into its basic format. However it is the basic PPP that we shall examine for it is this which the critics of PPP attack.

2.1 What PPP involves and why.

The standard class consists of presentation, practice and production. Typically a teacher selects a target or ‘language item’ from a preordained syllabus and explains it deductively to the student. The choice of target is based on the course book writer’s intuition of what is suitable. Nearly all TEFL books follow the same syllabus, and this is based on the intuition of the author rather than on any

research. When presenting the target, other language is stripped away, the intention being that the student should not be confused or distracted by anything.

The purpose of the presentation stage is to; ‘help the learner acquire new linguistic knowledge or to restructure knowledge that has been wrongly represented’, says Ellis (1988:21). The belief is that the students interlanguage will instantly develop as new language is explained to them. In subsequent lessons, new language will ‘build’ on top of what was taught previously, or as Skehan (1996:17) says; ‘There is a belief that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught’.

The practice stage is typically divided into two sections, controlled and freer. In controlled practice the student is involved in mechanical production, simply repeating the target, without needing to think about when to use it. In freer practice the student decides how the target is used and may be required to manipulate the form. The assumption here is that the learner understands the forms of the target language, but needs practice to internalize the structure. This is a behaviourist view of learning, that practice leads to mastery.

The production stage is when the student must decide if and when to use the structure that has been ‘learnt’. It is a question of great debate whether this part of the class is communicative, but to the PPP teacher this stage of the lesson should illustrate if the student has learnt the ‘language item’ by using it in a ‘natural’ context or activity.

3 Criticisms of PPP

PPP is criticised for many reasons, for its assumptions on how students learn, for the syllabus it chooses, for what is done in the classroom.

3.1 Criticisms of the theory of learning.

Perhaps the major criticism of PPP is that students do not learn in the way that it supposes. One reason for believing this is that classroom observation has shown repeatedly that what is presented to students is seldom retained outside of an individual lesson, even though it seems to have been mastered in the course of a lesson. As Willis (1996:47) says; ‘We may go through a lesson with every appearance of success....but the next time the occasion arises to put the form to communicative use they fail to do so.’

SLA researchers believe learners do not as Skehan says, ‘simply acquire the language to which they are exposed.’ Instead each student tries to make sense of the foreign language that they are learning by constructing their own theories and hypotheses about how it works. Each individual’s

interlanguage develops at its own pace, and will only 'learn' when it is ready to do so. Willis cites Long and Crookes (1992:31) 'Where syntax is concerned, research shows that learners rarely if ever move from zero to target like mastery of new items in one step.' Willis D (1996:46) concurs, 'we cannot isolate a particular language form and 'present' it to learners in such a way that it becomes part of their communicative performance.'

A consequence of stripping away other language when presenting a target to students, is that students are denied comprehensible input, which might be of use to them. As we can not know what a student is ready to learn next, it make no sense to limit what they are exposed to, as it might deny them the opportunity to notice a language item that could be 'acquired'.

A second major shortcoming of the PPP approach according to its critics is the belief that 'grammar' of the target language can be adequately described, and taught. This is a fault not just of PPP but other approaches too. Prabhu, Rutherford and Willis doubt that any descriptive grammar is adequate to describe a user's grammar, therefore Willis says; (1990:8) 'if our pedagogic description of the language is inadequate, then in order to learn then language the learner must operate strategies which do not depend on a grammatical description of the language.'

Furthermore the grammar which is presented is easy but the more difficult aspects are ignored. Rules are often simplified to the point that the generalisation is more of a hindrance than a help in understanding, and to maintain some credibility of the isolated language rule, other examples which contravene the rule are ignored, and excluded so as not to confuse students. Willis, D (1990:44) writes, 'It is a strange teaching strategy ... which allocates a large portion of time to ... straightforward grammatical systems and very little time to the most problematic systems. It is stranger still if, in the interests of grading, we deny learners exposure to the language which might enable them to draw conclusions for themselves about such problematic systems.'

The production stage of PPP is also strongly criticised, with applied linguists denying that real communication takes place because of what has happened in the presentation and practice stages of the class. It is generally felt in SLA that the best way for learners to learn is to concentrate on meaning rather than form, and though the intention of the teacher in a PPP environment might be to do this in the production stage, it is debatable as to whether this can be achieved, as learners are likely to concentrate on using the target language practised in the first two phases of the lesson. As Willis says; 'It is difficult to see how activities can be regarded as truly communicative if the learners' main objective is not to achieve some outcome through the use of language, but to demonstrate to the teacher their control of the target form.'(1990:4-5)

Drilling and correction it is argued, are similarly futile as the interlanguage will not absorb a drilled

structure, regardless of the amount of repetition, nor will error correction effect the interlanguage until it is ready.

4 Reasons for the continuing dominance of PPP

4.1 Difficulty in defining PPP

As mentioned before, defining exactly what happens in PPP is very problematic as it means different things to different people. For some, (such as Skehan) it is how foreign languages are taught at school, for others how the RSA trains teachers (Willis and O'Dwyer 1996:152), and for yet others it is the 'dominant model for the communicative approach' (Edwards 1996:99) . Perhaps the only constant is the order of the lesson. Although this does not detract from the theoretical criticisms of the way in which languages are learnt, I would argue that PPP can and does involve pair work, group work and often the production stage is a task and genuinely communicative, and this accounts to some extent for its continued use.

4.2 Reliability of SLA research

There is also some scepticism from teachers that academics really know what goes on in the classroom. Hopkins and Nettle (1993:161) in response to Ellis, say that teachers are interested in the findings of research 'when research shows itself to be aware of current classroom practice'. It is difficult to be sure of typical classroom practice as observed lessons are seldom typical. The very fact that an observer, camera or tape recorder is in the class will ensure that the teacher will do their best to teach how they have been trained, and this is often strict PPP and not what they do when unobserved. A typical lesson will most probably be far less regimented. Scrivener acknowledges the same is true of trainers (1996:79); 'the paradox is that many tutors who use PPP as a training paradigm don't actually use PPP as much in their own English language teaching.'

Hopkins and Nettles reaction might be called defensive, but this should not be unexpected, as many teachers will have taught the PPP way all their careers, and to be told that it is wrong infers they have wasted their time.

4.3 SLA assumptions

Skehan (1996:18) writes that 'students commonly leave school with very little in the way of usable language' which he attributes to PPP. It seems rather unfair to blame this on PPP, as it is debatable if PPP is actually how schools in the UK teach, and because students in high schools generally have very little motivation to learn a foreign language, and it is difficult to see any approach being successful. According to Crystal (1997:5) 'a quarter of the world's population is already fluent or

competent in English'. Whilst no-one would claim that PPP was responsible for all of this, it has presumably been used for some successful language learners. Willis concedes that because the PPP methodology is 'language rich', an accident of PPP, this explains 'its relative success' (1990:13), but it is difficult to reconcile Crystal's figures with Skehan's and Willis' criticism. The SLA researchers seem to believe that learning in PPP is despite PPP, but this is difficult to empirically prove and it does seem that PPP is damned if it works and damned if it fails.

Another issue related to this, is what is a realistic expectation for second language learners. It could be that some people simply will not learn a second language regardless of the methodology employed. Or, alternatively, approaches may make only the most minimal difference to language learning.

A further difficulty that teachers have in reconciling SLA research with their own teaching situation is that students are not all motivated, and expectations on how they learn will be influenced by local conditions. Holliday (1994) pleads that theories should not be about 'learners but about pupils and students in real classroom settings'.

4.4 *SLA Volatility*

Another reason not to abandon the PPP methodology is that SLA theory could change, as it has often done in the past. Should this happen, then a slow response to current research might prove to be beneficial as was the case when Krashen's theory of language learning/acquisition was first greeted with enthusiasm, but later was seen to be flawed.

There is also the question of whether SLA research should lead teaching. It does seem that there is constant claim and counter claim, a fact acknowledged by Lightbown when she says of universal patterns of development that for every study supporting universal patterns of development 'there are others studies which provide counter-evidence'.

Currently the value of negotiation of meaning in communicative activities is being questioned. In theory, tasks which require 'negotiation of meaning' should result in learner exchanges but it has been revealed that students often do not negotiate meaning if they do not understand something, but hope to make sense of it through the context of what comes later. Pauline Foster (1997:23) calls this 'the strategy of pretend and hope rather than the strategy of 'check and clarify'.

Seedhouse (1998:153-4) attacks tasks disputing that they will 'stimulate learners to mobilize all their linguistic resources and push their linguistic knowledge to the limit' as Nunan claims,

(1998:84) but contends that the opposite happens ‘with learners producing such a minimum display of their language competence that it resembles pidgin’.

Even Ellis (1994:687) admits, ‘doubts have continued about whether SLA research should serve as a basis for giving advice to teachers’ and he cites Lightbown (1985:182) concluding, ‘second-language acquisition research does not tell teachers what to teach, and what it says about how to teach they have already figured out’.

Although there are obvious difficulties in comparing approaches such as PPP and TBL as it is difficult to control what students might do outside the classroom, it should be possible to contrast teaching approaches to some extent. It would also help if testing of research was done by an outside body such as TESOL, rather than by academics who are supporters of one approach or another.

Holliday also makes the point that teachers feel little ‘ownership’ of theories and consequently are unwilling to adopt SLA research as eagerly as they might. Coupled with this, is a lack of awareness amongst teachers of what current research is. Overseas, only the most privileged teachers will be able to attend seminars or read journals.

It is also impossible to be certain how much difference the teaching methodology makes on a student’s English. Nunan (1991:248) concluded; ‘we have yet to devise a method which is capable of teaching anybody anything’.

5 Conservatism

Perhaps the single most important reason for the continued dominance of PPP is conservatism. This is entirely natural, and exists in all domains of the profession, teachers, students, teacher training and publishing.

5.1 Teachers and Teacher Training

Skehan a strong critic of PPP, points out how teachers and trainers have close relationship with PPP, and how it gives teachers a sense of professionalism and techniques that help organise large classes.

These are excellent reasons for continuing with PPP. It must be remembered that the turn-over rate within ELT is high, and training needs to provide trainees with the confidence to be in front of a class after one month’s training.

The RSA has long been associated with PPP, and Willis in an interview with Lynette Murphy-O’Dwyer, the head of the TEFL unit at UCLES, illustrates how difficult it is to implement change.

O'Dwyer, (1996:150) makes the valid point that; 'Our role is to respond to the profession, not impose values on it.' This is a very reasonable view as any change stands more chance of success if it is from the bottom upwards, rather than from the top downwards.

She concedes that the RSA lesson is often felt to be PPP, even though it is not the specified approach, because 'it reflects the fact that on most courses the PPP model has been used as the model that introduces candidates to their professional skills'(1996:153) . This demonstrates that many trainers favour the PPP model, and it will not be until they have discarded the PPP paradigm, that its influence will die out.

5.2 Publishing

If textbooks were not based on PPP then teachers would probably change their style of teaching. One reason for this conservatism is that publishers exist to make money, and any radical departure from the norm could be loss making. Conversely, if a publisher felt that changing from PPP would be successful they would seize the opportunity, but this has yet to happen.

5.3 Students

Learner beliefs can not be ignored, particularly in language schools, which are dependent on student fees. Lightbown and Spada (1999:59) say; 'these beliefs are usually based on previous learning experiences and the assumption ...that a particular type of instruction is the best way for them to learn'. They cite Yorio (1986) who details complaints from students learning through CLT instead of PPP, and Denise Ozdeniz (1996:110-125) reports students' doubts about TBL when first used. This is not an insurmountable barrier, but it exists.

6 Accountability

Skehan (1998:94) writes; 'A second reason for the continued importance of this approach is that it lends itself very neatly to accountability, since it generates clear and tangible goals, precise syllabuses, and a comfortably itemizable basis for the evaluation of effectiveness.'

This is a crucial reason as students will need to be assessed, and to do so a uniform syllabus is required. However deficient a PPP syllabus might be, it does provide a standard test. Many would accept that it tests only language manipulation rather than use, but it does provide teachers and students with feedback of some kind, and importantly it is accepted by students, teachers and parents, regardless of its failings. Skehan, is very critical of testing as it currently exists; (1998:291) 'the development of 'communicative' approaches to testing will only be a veneer, based on intuition and hunch, rather than founded on principle' but he provides no tangible alternative.

7 Lack of an alternative ?

Skehan's final reason for the continuance of the 'discredited, meaning-impooverished methodology' of PPP is 'the lack of a clear alternative for pedagogy, not so much theoretically as practically, an alternative framework which will translate into classroom organization, teacher training, and accountability and assessment.' The favoured replacement of academics is TBL and although there are different models by Nunan, Skehan and Willis J, we shall look at the latter, as this seems to be the one most designed with the teacher in mind.

7.1 Willis' model

This is a five point model, in which a task is (1996:53) 'a goal-orientated activity in which learners use language to achieve real outcome'. The first stage is pre-task, in which interest is generated in the topic, and possible words and phrases are highlighted but not taught to students. The second stage is the task, the third is planning the report, and the fourth is reporting the task to the class as a whole. The final stage is language focus, when analysis and practice of language occurs.

The task itself is done by the students in pairs or groups and it is felt that fluency will develop as the teacher does not correct and the students are concentrating on meaning rather than form. In the report stage it is believed that students will concentrate on accuracy as they are addressing a group, and attention is therefore given to the form of what they are saying. In this part of the class the students may ask the teacher for help if they wish.

The language focus consists of consciousness-raising exercises, when it is hoped that the students will notice a lack in their language ability. There is no expectation that what is focused on will be learnt as this is contrary to the interlanguage theory. A further point worth noting is that more than one language item will be focused on, therefore increasing the likelihood that something on the brink of being learnt will be acquired.

7.2 Possible reservations

The TBL approach is different to past learning experiences, so needs to convince students and teachers of its merit.

7.2.1 Intuition

Intuition tells us that students learn what we teach, so the concept of performing the task, or production phase from the PPP before language work seems peculiar. As Willis herself says (1996:62) to be successful teachers must overcome the belief that learners, 'must be taught the right

forms first otherwise how can they do the task ?' Equally, as the stage is at the end of the lesson, it will seem unnatural for the teacher not to perform a production activity to see if the work on form has been learnt. Willis partly provides a way of doing this by suggesting that students repeat the task with a different partner, but she would not expect the students to be fluently incorporating any words from the language focus, whereas PPP teachers would. As Willis says it is vital that teachers and students understand the rationale behind the approach or it will fail.

7.2.2 Less predictable

The focus on form in TBL is less predictable, and teachers may feel ill at ease as students could ask questions that expose a lack of knowledge in the teacher. This is a genuine fear, and a reason why PPP would be preferred by some teachers as the input is controlled.

7.2.3 Monolingual classrooms

Group work in monolingual classrooms often fails as it is an artificial environment, and though this potential failing could be avoided because of the need to report to the rest of the class, those in the group who are not reporting will need encouragement from the teacher to participate.

8 Conclusion

PPP is totally incompatible with current thinking in SLA, but it survives because it has proved itself to be the most easily learnt teaching approach, the most effective at managing large classes, and has cherry-picked appealing techniques from other approaches. It also benefits from resistance to change, lack of a clear consensus on what might best replace it, lack of awareness as to alternatives and suspicion on the part of teachers towards SLA theory .

Furthermore whilst TBL seems the obvious successor, there is currently academic debate on what is the best model for TBL and reservations as to whether it will be applicable in all teaching environments. It is also possible that TBL is too radically different and as Tessa Woodward (1996:9) says; 'a more natural approach forward may be to start experimenting or applying insights a little at a time'.

The final, acid test of any approach is whether teachers are willing and able to change. However deficient PPP may be to theorists, disaffection with PPP needs to be common place in the classroom, both with teachers and students. It seems that teacher training institutions are moving away from an atomistic approach to language learning (Scrivener, Hunt, O'Dwyer) and this will filter down eventually to the classroom, but whether TBL or any new approach is successful in displacing PPP, will not depend ultimately on theories of language learning. It will depend on the

practicalities of implicating the whole package associated with it; classroom organisation, syllabus, testing, cost and perhaps most importantly whether the teachers and language planners, native or non-native, have the ability and desire to adopt an alternative approach.

Swan advised (1985:87) that when a new approach comes along we should not ask; 'Is it true?', but 'What good does it do?' and urges that we should 'try out new techniques without giving up useful older methods, simply because they have been 'proved wrong'. This seems to be sound advice. Teachers should be open to new ideas, but must decide for themselves what works best for their particular students. It will be interesting to see how long PPP survives as the dominant methodology.

REFERENCES

- Crystal, D (1997) *English as a Global Language*: CUP
- Edwards C (1996) Learning to learn how to teach: developing expertise through experience in Willis D and J Willis *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*: Macmillan Heinemann, 99-107
- Ellis R (1988) The Role of Practice in Classroom Learning: AILA review 5:20-39
- Ellis R (1994) *The study of second Language Acquisition*: OUP
- Foster P (1998) A classroom perspective on the negotiation of meaning: *Applied Linguistics* 19: 1-23
- Holliday A (1994) The House Of TESEP and the communicative approach: the special needs of state English Education: ELTJ 48/1 3-11
- Hopkins D and Nettle M (1994) Second language acquisition research: a response to Rod Ellis: ELTJ 48/2 157-161
- Hunt R (1999) Distinctions and Dichotomies ETP Issue 12 July: p19
- Lewis M 1994 'Implications of a lexical view of language' in Willis D and J Willis *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*: Macmillan Heinemann, 10-16
- Lightbown P and Spada, N (1999) *How Languages are Learned*: OUP
- Nunan D (1991) *Language Teaching Methodology*: Prentice Hall
- Ozdeniz D (1996) Introducing innovations to your teaching language in Willis D and J Willis *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*: Macmillan Heinemann, 79-92
- Scrivener J (1996) ARC: a descriptive model for classroom work on language in Willis D and J Willis *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*: Macmillan Heinemann, 79-92
- Seedhouse (1999) 'Task-based interaction' ELTJ 53: 149-156
- Skehan P A (1998) *Cognitive approach to Language Learning*: OUP
- Swan M (1985) *A critical look at the Communicative Approach* (1) ELTJ 39/1: 2-12
- Swan M (1985) *A critical look at the Communicative Approach* (2) ELTJ 39/2:76-87
- Willis D, (1990) *The Lexical Syllabus*: Collins Cobuild
- Willis D and J Willis (1996) *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*: Macmillan Heinemann
- Woodward T (1996) Paradigm shift and the language teaching profession in Willis D and J Willis *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*: Macmillan Heinemann, 4-9