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Question 3.

‘Any paradigm based on, or remotely resembling, Present-Practise-Produce (PPP) is wholly unsatisfactory, failing, as it does to reflect either the nature of language or the nature of learning.’(Michael Lewis, in ‘Challenge and Change in Language Teaching, Willis D and J Willis eds. 1996 Heinemann. Page 11) Do you agree with Michael Lewis’s view on PPP?

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will argue that, whilst Present-Practise-Produce (PPP) has little to do with either ‘the nature of language’ or ‘the nature of learning’, it is not ‘wholly unsatisfactory’ as claimed by Lewis (1996: 11). Contexts in which PPP is used ‘satisfactorily’, in that it represents or supplies what students, teachers, educational policy makers, or exam boards, require will be explored.

I shall examine the question in three parts. In the first part I shall explain the theories behind PPP and what each stage involves. In the second part I shall discuss the criticisms of PPP made by Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers, which clearly show that the paradigm is not in line with current ideas about language and learning. In the third part of the essay reasons for the continuing presence of PPP in the classroom will be explored and shown to be of major importance in explaining why it is not ‘wholly unsatisfactory’ (Lewis 1996:11).

Finally I will conclude that PPP does not remain in use due to ignorance, as SLA research and its supporters indicate, but as the result of contexts and considerations which constitute constraints very real to many teachers.

Whilst currently-preferred methods and theories may be referred to briefly as alternatives to PPP in this text, this is not the place for their in-depth examination.

PPP: IT’S THEORIES AND WHAT IT INVOLVES

PPP is a three-part teaching paradigm: Presentation, Practise and Production; based on behaviourist theory which states that learning a language is just like learning any other skill (Ur 1996: 19). The high degree of teacher control which characterises the first and second stages of PPP, lessens as the class proceeds, allowing the learner to gradually move away from the teacher’s support towards more automatic production and understanding (Read 1985: 17; Ur 1996: 27).

PPP uses a classic deductive approach with grammar being explicitly introduced in the Presentation stage, the first part of the class, by the teacher. The Target Language (TL) for the day is chosen by the teacher from a syllabus of discrete language segments. Material

presented to the students is manipulated, or finely-tuned, to emphasise the TL and remove reference to other language items which have yet to be presented (Read 1985:17). This is to allow students to concentrate on the TL without further distractions.

The explanation of the TL as ‘a rule-of-thumb’ (Leech 1994:28) is typically kept brief (Read 1985: 17), the idea being that this information will enter the student’s short-term memory (Ur 1996: 12) and be available for use later in the class, in the Practise and Production stages.

Following the Presentation stage, Practise, with its focus on form and teacher control, encourages students to use the TL in a highly-controlled way. Conformity to the model presented by the teacher is highly rewarded (LTM 1999), and failure to produce the TL as per the model is regarded as error. Any errors are corrected as grammar and structure take precedence over meaning.

Central to the PPP paradigm is the belief that the student will be able to master the TL by conforming to the model (Ellis 1988; Skehan 1996: 17). This approach relies upon intense exposure and practice of the pre-selected TL for its success (Prabhu 1987: 73-4).

The final stage, Production, is intended to allow the student the opportunity to produce the newly-assimilated language in a more communicative way (Read 1985: 17; Lewis 1993: 152). At the same time the teacher is given the opportunity to see if the student can produce the TL correctly, believed to be an indication that the it has been understood. In this way PPP facilitates testing as deciding if the student has mastered the TL is seen to be relatively uncomplicated (Skehan 1996: 17) due to the restricted nature of the way the language has been introduced.

CRITICISM OF THE RELEVANCE OF PPP TO ‘THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE OR THE NATURE OF LEARNING’ (LEWIS 1996: 11).

PPP has been severely criticised for adhering to the behaviourist view of learning, now widely-discredited by current SLA research (Skehan 1996: 18; 80). The influence of SLA research on teaching theory and practice will be examined below.

A deductive approach to grammar teaching is now out of favour and there has been a move in recent years towards more inductive, ‘communicative’, student-led models. Task-based

learning (TBL), for example, is one of a number of teaching methods which rely on discovery techniques, using explicit grammar explanation in a limited way, if at all, at the end of the teaching cycle. Such methods are now advocated in many journals and some textbooks.

Lewis rejects the value of either Presentation or Practice as used in PPP:

‘Teachers must accept that however convenient from a teaching point of view pedagogic explanation and controlled practice may be, the evidence is that neither assists acquisition’ (1993: 148).

An examination of PPP and its components with reference to this will follow below.

The Practice stage of the PPP paradigm in particular has attracted a lot of criticism. To summarise the vast amount that has been written, it is seen to be time-consuming (Ellis 1988), under tight control from the teacher and therefore rigid (Willis 1990: 151), inflexible and lacking the ability to adapt to the ever-changing classroom situation (Scrivener 1996: 80), and of no use to students’ learning processes (Lewis 1993:151). Willis stresses that it is conformity, not communication, being practised (Willis 1990: 4; 1996: 44).

The basic assumption of PPP, that students who can ably perform the TL model presented have an understanding of that model, is now known to be false (LTM 1999). SLA research has indicated that learning is not a linear process (Lewis 1993: 55) and that therefore attempting to divide the language up into segments to be taught in a sequence (Peinemann 1984, cited in Ellis 1988), as PPP does, does not aid learning (Willis: 1996:49). Willis explains that teaching grammar as discrete items, with fixed rules will serve only to confuse students once they encounter more complex grammar which will not fit the prototype they have been shown (Willis, 2000).

If, as SLA research indicates, learning is not a linear process (Lewis 1993: 55), and students do not learn in a linear way (Willis 1990: 130), then a number of implications arise with respect to teaching. Firstly, it cannot be possible to know what students have already assimilated and can use freely, and what is still unstable in their memory (Willis 1990: 69). This being so, the likelihood of all the students in a class being at the same stage and ready to learn the next ‘segment’ of TL in the syllabus seems remote. Prabhu (1987: 70) supports this argument when pointing out that if students are at different stages they will all be concentrating on different forms and meanings at any one time.

Leading on from this it seems reasonable to conclude that if the student's internal language processing has an individual rhythm (Prabhu 1987: 76; Lewis 1993: 151), then it is impossible to tell if what the student is learning is what is being taught in the classroom. The teacher has no guarantee that what is being presented and practised is actually being retained (Prabhu 1987:73; Ellis 1988; Lewis 1993: 56). In a paradigm such as PPP these factors are not taken into account: students are all assumed to be concentrating on the same item of language at the same time; learning at the same rhythm.

It is now recognised that in reality students are more likely to be merely displaying the model of the TL than producing it with understanding (Ellis 1993). If this is the case, then Ellis (1988) concludes that it is occurring because students are not at the appropriate stage of their individual learning process. Alternatively, it is argued that if students can produce the model, it is as a result of having acquired it previously, in which case Practise is extraneous (Ellis 1988; Lewis 1993: 149). Other methods of learning, TBL for example, allow for this individual, non-linear learning, and neither force students to produce language before they are ready, nor require them to endlessly repeat what they have already learnt.

Prabhu (cited in Ellis 1988) concluded that controlled practice, such as that characteristic of PPP, 'obstructed the learner's engagement with meaning and so impeded learning'. Whilst this may be taking the argument to an extreme, it cannot be denied that the contrastive nature of the input offered in PPP, ostensibly to enable the student to make clear assumptions about the language, does not reflect how the language is used in the real world where there are infinitely more choices available to the user. Further discussion of this idea will continue below with regard to the Production stage.

The final stage of the PPP paradigm, Production, has not escaped criticism. The consensus view among many writers is that students are still concentrating on form and not meaning at this stage, and that if they do attempt to concentrate on meaning, they tend to be totally inaccurate with regard to form as a result (Ellis 1993; Willis 1990: 4). In addition to this, if the Production stage is no less controlled than Practise, and students are given few choices on what they can and cannot say (Willis 1990:26), as is the situation in many cases, real 'communication' is an illusion. Thus, 'Production' is a misnomer: it is just another example of students displaying language (Littlewood 1981 cited in Willis 1990: 5; Willis 1996: 47).

Many writers have argued that it is not realistic to expect students to master the TL in one session, as no time has been allowed them for assimilation (Ellis 1988; Prabhu 1987: 70; Skehan 1996: 19; Willis 1990: 24; 1996: 46). Students are not prepared for accurate production at this stage and are far more likely to commit errors; errors which, as explained above, are regarded as failure in the PPP paradigm (Lewis 1993: 20; 172). This intolerance of error, typical of PPP, contrasts with more ‘communicative’ approaches, which focus on meaning more than on form.

Alternatively, Production may be relatively free of teacher control in comparison with the preceding two stages. However, even if this is the case, the third stage of the paradigm remains problematic. Although students may have learnt the rules by this stage, they have not learnt how to use the language naturally (Skehan cited in SLA 1999: 7.3.3) as mentioned above. Despite every appearance of having mastered the TL in Practise, as students move away from controlled to more real-life, spontaneous speech in Production, they fail to communicate clearly and commit errors (Ellis 1993; Willis 1996: 47). It can be a long time before students produce the TL correctly in spontaneous speech. SLA research has pointed out that both comprehension and the rate of learning are student-controlled and unpredictable (Prabhu 1987: 79-80). Therefore, any attempt at the end of the lesson to monitor how much the students have learnt that day (Read 1985: 17) is essentially a waste of time.

Krashen’s explanation of learning and acquisition (cited in Ellis 1982), in which ‘learning’ refers to an ability to manipulate language, and ‘acquisition’, to the ability to use language freely, provides a useful reference point when examining PPP. It helps to look at PPP as attempts to induce learning and acquisition through the Present and Practise stages, and to demonstrate acquisition in Production. Thus, using Krashen’s terms, it could be said that the TL is learnt, but not acquired by the Production stage. It is also possible to say that students learn to mimic and to perform to please the teacher before they absorb the information about how the TL works and are able to use it to express themselves in spontaneous speech.

Lewis draws attention to these ‘unproductive teaching attitudes’ (1993: 189): unproductive for the students submitted to this kind of pressure when they are not ready (Ellis 1985: 221; Prabhu 1987: 78; Lewis 1993: 189); and unproductive for the teacher who is under pressure to ‘complete’ the material for the lesson/term and show that the students have ‘mastered’ the TL (Hedge in Ellis 1993).

The manipulation of materials in PPP has also been heavily criticised; Ellis, for example, calls it 'distorted input' (1985: 222). Over the last decade there has been a steady movement within TEFL towards more authentic materials. More recent methods, under the banner of 'communicative language teaching' (CLT) avoid the finely-tuned input of PPP in favour of more roughly-tuned input, to expose students to a variety of language. In this way, students, whatever stage they may have reached with their language learning, are more likely to be exposed to language that they are ready to learn.

PPP has been shown to give unwarranted emphasis to a focus on form, not meaning, stressing language manipulation at the cost of language use, and focusing on language patterns and sequences which are of little use to the student (Willis 1990:72). Looking in detail at the different elements of PPP it is undoubtedly the case that there is little to recommend it as a teaching paradigm. PPP appears to be totally indefensible as Lewis states (1996:14).

THE CONTINUING INFLUENCE OF PPP

Having shown above that PPP has nothing to do with 'the nature of language or the nature of learning' (Lewis 1996:11), it is now important to turn to the question of why PPP remains present in classrooms. Given that it contradicts current SLA research theories about language and learning, it is necessary to try to understand why it continues to be an influence. It will be shown below why PPP is not so 'wholly unsatisfactory' (Lewis 1996: 11) as it might at first appear.

In the course of this essay it has been stated a number of times that PPP has been discredited by SLA researchers. Lewis (1993: 153) explains that SLA research and linguistic theory call for a move away from a focus on production to a more 'receptive' way of teaching. 'Communicative' methods, especially those using tasks to introduce language are now advocated. However, whilst SLA research states that PPP is still widely-used, Hopkins and Nettle (1994), both experienced, practising teachers, argue that PPP is no longer dominant in the classroom and that many teachers have moved on from this restrictive paradigm by adapting it or using more innovative methods. They conclude that SLA research and classroom practice do not reflect one another at this point in time.

The divide between what SLA research and classroom teachers report is a cause for concern. It is difficult to know which of the two reflects the true situation. It should be mentioned that much of the research carried out is, unfortunately, unique and without replication. Researchers do not want to carry out studies to prove/disprove others' theories, but wish to work on their own hypotheses. This means that it is difficult to tell with any certainty if the findings of a particular study reveal a widely-spread phenomenon, or an isolated case.

For the purposes of this part of the essay it will be assumed that PPP remains an influential teaching paradigm. Various important considerations such as, student needs and expectations, the cultural context within which classrooms exist, the position of the teacher, materials, and examinations, will be referred to in the ensuing paragraphs.

Many students do not wish to change from a paradigm like PPP to another more 'learner-centred' method for a number of reasons. There are students that simply do not want to change because PPP is what they are used to (Corder 1986) and they find any suggestion of change unsettling. Others like PPP because it affords the focus on form that they believe necessary to language learning (Willis 1996: 50). This gives them confidence (Willis 1990:73; 1996: 49) and makes them feel like they are learning which can be an important motivational factor.

Following Hopkins and Nettle (1994), the importance of motivation should be stressed. At lower levels especially, students often need some form of 'safety blanket' to provide security when faced with the unknown; in this case a new language. PPP does this: students are presented with one language item at a time and they do not have to cope with too much new information at once. They are guided by the teacher along clearly-defined routes and the language is 'generalisable, explicable, [and] describable' (Willis 2000). In addition, many students, in particular those at lower levels, expect to leave class every day having learnt how to do/say something that they could not before (Hopkins and Nettle 1994). PPP promises all of the above.

Students may like the feeling that the teacher is in charge, equate this control with competence and place their trust in the teacher's perceived ability as a result. Students who feel this way may be extremely resistant to attempts to move away from the PPP paradigm to a more learner-centred framework. In fact, a class or teacher that fails to live up to the above

expectations can lead to the loss of student motivation, and a lack of trust and confidence in the teacher. This in turn can result in a lack of co-operation in class, or even hostility towards the teacher.

These are not minor considerations. Student resistance to change should not be underestimated. If students are not ready to change it can prove very difficult for the teacher (Willis J 1996: 62). Students who think that the teacher is doing it 'wrong' will often perceive the teacher, albeit unfairly, as incompetent (Bassano 1986).

Obviously here is a case for learner-training and for making students aware of effective alternatives to PPP, such as TBL and other methods which emphasise more learner involvement and Consciousness Raising (CR) activities. However, the teacher must proceed with care, introducing new styles slowly, explaining what he/she is doing and why, and stressing how effective the different styles are, for both the students and the teacher if he/she wishes to implement change with the minimum of adverse reaction.

Pérez Basanta (1996) stresses the extent to which context can influence a teacher's classroom methodology. Context can mean so many things, for example: the students (their needs and expectations); the context within the school i.e. the teaching/education policy implemented by the Director of Studies; and the wider society within which the school exists i.e. the national education policy. All of which have an effect on the teacher's choice of teaching method. As a result teachers can be caught in a situation where they are expected to teach in a way that does not reflect their own personal methodology. Cultural contexts and educational policy-makers can play a significant role. There are cultures in which collectivist, not individualist, values are dominant and in such cultures a 'communicative' style might not be appropriate. It should be recalled that such styles with more of a focus on meaning, and CR activities, have been developed without consultation with the teachers in these contexts, or thought for how they can adapt such approaches to their teaching situations (Holliday 1994). In such cases PPP, far from being 'wholly unsatisfactory' (Lewis 1996:11) is, in fact, a very satisfactory option, reflecting as it does, an approach favoured by an institution or wider educational policy.

Lewis (1996: 14) is dismissive of context-related problems and student expectations. However, it would be unrealistic to expect students from these cultures to readily change their perceptions of classrooms and teachers gained from years of experience as students, for what is essentially a very small part of their week. Students and educational policy-makers have probably been among the major contributors to the continued existence of PPP. Other factors, concerning teachers, materials and exams will be examined below.

It cannot be ignored that there are instances where teachers are happy with PPP. The ‘accountability’ that it affords each lesson, providing them with a clearly defined goal (Skehan 1996: 17) can be appealing. There are also teachers who are reluctant to relinquish PPP and the control, predictability, and security that it affords them (Willis 1990: 131; Edwards 1996: 104) in the classroom either because of the kudos that it gives them, or because they feel threatened by change (Pérez Basanta 1996). For such teachers as these PPP is very convenient (Skehan 1996: 18).

Despite evidence to the contrary, (as outlined above,) there are teachers who still assume that by adopting PPP they know what their students are learning because they know what they have taught. Resistance to change in this case is the result of ignorance. Teachers who cling to PPP, still believing it to be the dominant paradigm, could be the product of pre-service training courses, which over-emphasised its role. Murphy-O’Dwyer denies, on behalf of the RSA, that this situation was ever intended and has reassured us that things are now changing (1996).

Training for new teachers has long been problematic in that in just a few short weeks trainers need to prepare trainees for going into the classroom. Many argue convincingly that PPP was only ever intended as a ‘stepping stone’ measure to enable new teachers to go into the classroom with the confidence necessary to cope with the pressures and time constraints they were faced with (Kerr 1996: 95; Murphy-O’Dwyer 1996: 153; Scrivener 1996: 81), not as a long-term solution. As Edwards (1996: 99) points out, it can safely be assumed that experienced teachers would see the failings of PPP and experiment with different styles and methods. With experience comes the ability to be more critical of the methodologies available and it seems highly unlikely that experienced teachers, would follow what Lewis calls ‘recipes’ (1993: 190) for their classes.

Time constraints can also be decisive (Hopkins and Nettle 1994), in that teachers have little class time and a lot of syllabus material in many cases which they are expected to cover. However, it remains difficult to imagine that an experienced teacher with the opportunity to select a teaching methodology would choose PPP in its original form. As Widdowson states:

‘In using them [teaching methods] in classrooms and in discussing them with colleagues, teachers will change them, replace them, and develop their own, more immediate to their own teaching circumstances. They have, in this sense, an essentially catalytic character. Their [teaching methods] function is to stimulate a pragmatic approach to teaching and teacher education’ (1990: 69-70).

It is generally accepted that PPP may continue to be present in the classroom as the result of teacher selection, but little mention is made of the fact that many teaching materials still support the PPP paradigm (Willis 1990: iii; 1996: 50-51) whether overtly or covertly, and continue to reflect traditional, behaviourist ideas based on a deductive approach (LTM 1999).

Materials will continue to present language learning in this way as long as demand continues and demand will continue as long as examinations test students by asking them to manipulate language and focus on form, instead of focusing on meaning and language use. Lewis himself has admitted that imposing a new teaching style on an unsuspecting public would be ‘economically dangerous’ whilst examinations continue to dictate the syllabus (1995; 1996: 14). My teaching experience in Spain supports this. Whilst relatively open to more ‘communicative’ approaches to learning, based on CR and tasks, at times students wanted formulas to pass internationally-recognised examinations and asked for explicit grammar instruction. As long as examinations are based on language manipulation there will be a market for the PPP paradigm and similar approaches to teaching whether or not SLA research supports it.

Finally, mention must be made of the difficulties faced by teachers abroad in trying to keep up-to-date with the latest developments in SLA research and its implications for TEFL. In parts of the world where news of the latest materials and research is limited, access to teacher-training workshops and seminars is not the norm either (Holliday 1994). Without the necessary information, teachers, although they may have the opportunity to choose a method

which is not similar to PPP, will be limited in their choice. Even in countries where seminars and workshops do regularly take place, invitations are often extended not to individual teachers, but to schools or institutions. Therefore, the schools, not the teachers, ultimately decide who will have access to information about SLA research and teacher development.

CONCLUSION

PPP has been widely-criticised for not being based on ‘sound theoretical principles’ (Willis. J 1996:62) as has been shown in the first half of this essay. It is therefore relatively easy to agree with Lewis when he says that the PPP paradigm does not ‘reflect either the nature of language or the nature of learning’ (1996:11).

With regard to describing PPP as ‘wholly unsatisfactory’ (Lewis 1996:11), however, it is not so easy to agree. In the second half of this essay it has been shown that PPP continues to be used to the satisfaction of various people; be they students, education policy-makers, teachers, teacher trainers, material writers or examination writers. Whilst SLA research does not reflect the needs of these people, they are the ones who ensure that PPP, despite having little theoretical substance, continues to be used in our classrooms.

In the future this situation may change and PPP might be used to provide students with opportunities for communication and maybe even a balance between a focus on form and a focus on meaning if combined with other activities. It is impossible to tell. What is clear is that regardless of whether paradigms are about ‘the nature of language or the nature of learning’, the real decisions about whether or not a paradigm is ‘wholly unsatisfactory’ are made by those mentioned above and not by SLA researchers.

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