A Critical Look at the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) Approach: Challenges and Promises for ELT

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Abstract

English language teaching has left behind many ups and downs until the introduction of CLT and TBLT methodologies in recent years. Much attempt has been made both by researchers and language instructors to make use of the most efficient teaching practices aimed at enhancing language production and affecting learning outcomes in a positive way. In the same direction, during 1950s an approach emerged in the United Kingdom based on behaviorist teaching practices known as PPP, which soon popularized the field of language teaching and employed by many professional schools throughout the world. However, due to ignoring the communication as a main goal of language learning, this approach came under serious attacks and criticisms by various scholars from 1990s onwards. The present paper is an attempt to critically look at this issue from several perspectives: First, in order to know the three Ps approach, this article will present its main characteristics and principles. Second, it will elaborate on the main challenges and criticisms posed against this approach by various scholars. Finally, the advantages of applying the three Ps will be discussed as a useful teaching technique rather than an approach or method. Also, the implications will be pointed out both for language teachers and learners.

Keywords: The PPP, Criticisms and Problems, Advantages and Implications

1. Introduction

Before 1990s, the "Three Ps" approach to language teaching was referred to by some scholars as the most common modern methodology employed by professional schools around the world. It is a strong feature of the renowned CELTA certification and other TEFL qualifications offered especially in the United Kingdom (Ludescher). According to Harmer (2001, p. 86) "a variation on Audiolingualism in British-based teaching and elsewhere is the procedure most often referred to as PPP which stands for presentation, practice, production,". It follows the premise that knowledge becomes skill through successive practice and that language is learned in small chunks leading to the whole. This approach views accuracy as a precursor to fluency. As Harmer (2001) maintains PPP has been recommended to trainee teachers as a useful teaching procedure from the 1960s onwards.

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

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 emphasize the TL and remove reference to other

language items which have yet to be presented. This is to allow students to concentrate on the TL without further distractions. (Read 1985, p. 17, cited in Carless, 2009, p. 51)

According to Richards and Renandya (2002), many traditional approaches to language teaching are based on a focus on grammatical form and a cycle of activities that involves presentation of new language item, practice of the item under controlled conditions, and a production phase in which the learners try out the form in a more communicative context. This has been referred to as the P.P.P. approach and it forms the basis of such traditional methods of teaching as Audiolingualism and the Structural-Situational approach.

As Willis and Willis (1996, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) state a lesson plan based on PPP should have three phases as follows:

- ✓ *Presentation stage:* The teacher begins the lesson by setting up a situation, either eliciting or modeling some language that the situation calls for. Presentation may consist of model sentences, short dialogues illustrating target items, either read from the textbook, heard on the tape or acted out by the teacher.
- ✓ *Practice stage:* Students practice the new language in a controlled way. They drill sentences or dialogues by repeating after the teacher or the tape, in chorus and individually, until they can say them correctly. Other practice activities are matching parts of sentences, completing sentences or dialogues and asking and answering questions using the target language.
- ✓ *Production stage:* Students are encouraged to use the new language in a freer way, either for their own purposes and meanings or in a similar context introduced by the teacher. It can be a role play, a simulation activity or a communication task.

Byrne (1986) also notes that the sequence does not have to be followed rigidly, and that depending on the level of the students, their needs and the teaching materials being used, it would also be possible to move from production to presentation to practice.

PPP, in Thornbury's (1999) view, has a logic that is appealing to teachers and learners in that it reflects a notion of practice makes perfect, common in many skills; it allows the teacher to control the content and pace of the lesson; and as Skehan (2003) remarks, it provides a clear teacher role, in accordance with power relations often found in classrooms.

Being familiar with the main features and principles of this approach, in the following section, we will review a number of criticisms which have been mentioned in the literature by various scholars. Finally, in the last part of this paper the researcher tries to focus on the advantages associated with PPP and introduce it as a good teaching technique to be utilized by language instructors in many situations.

2. Problems with PPP

Knowing the features and principles of PPP, it should be mentioned that in spite of its popularity for some time in the field of language teaching, from the 1990s onwards, this approach came under sustained attack from academics. Some of the major problems associated with it are mentioned here.

Based on Ellis (2003), PPP views language as a series of products that can be acquired sequentially as accumulated entities. However, SLA research has shown that learners do not acquire a language in this way. Rather they construct a series of systems, known as interlanguages, which are gradually grammaticized and restructured as learners incorporate new features. Furthermore, research on developmental sequences has shown that learners pass through a series of transitional stages in acquiring a specific grammatical feature such as negatives, often taking months or even years before they arrive at the target form of the rule. In other words, L2 acquisition is a process that is incompatible with teaching seen as the presentation and practice of a series of products.

PPP is seen as lacking a firm basis in second language acquisition (SLA) theory; being too linear and behaviorist in nature, so failing to account for learners' stages of developmental readiness (Ellis, 2003); and is thus unlikely to lead to the successful acquisition of taught forms (Skehan, 1996).

Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 246) mention that there are practical problems with PPP as well. Clearly, the production stage calls for grammar tasks, that is, tasks that will elicit the feature that is the target of the lesson. However, it is not easy to design tasks that require learners to use a targeted structure, as learners can always fall back on their strategic competence to by-pass it.

The Practice stage of the PPP paradigm in particular has attracted a lot of criticism. To summarize 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, p. 151), inflexible and lacking the ability to adapt to the ever-changing classroom situation (Scrivener, 1996, p.80), and of no use to students' learning processes (Lewis, 1993, p.151). Willis stresses that it is conformity, not communication, being practiced. Also he 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, 1990, p. 4).

Skehan (1996) points out that such a sequence does not reflect principles of second language acquisition:

> The underlying theory for a PPP approach has now been discredited. The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology. (Skehan, 1996, p. 18).

In other words, as Skehan (1996) contends, language learning does not occur in a linear fashion influenced directly by the instruction that takes place. Instead, it is a multifaceted complex process in which many factors including learners' cognitive and affective characteristics are influential.

It also seems to assume that, in this teaching method, students learn "in straight lines" that is starting from no knowledge, through highly restricted sentence-based utterances and onto immediate production. Yet human learning probably is not like that; it is more random, more complicated, and full of interlocking variables and systems. (Woodward, 1993, p. 3, cited in Harmer, 2001, p. 82).

Lewis (1993) suggested that PPP was inadequate because it reflected neither the nature of language nor the nature of learning. This criticism seems to be quite logical in that the learners are required to merely mimic a model in a fixed linear order without paying attention to the inherent complexities of the language itself as well the teaching/learning process. Scrivener (1996) even wrote that it is fundamentally disabling, not enabling. Later, however, Scrivener advanced what is perhaps the most worrying aspect of PPP, the fact that it:

> Only describes one kind of lesson; it is inadequate as a general proposal concerning approaches to language in the classroom. It entirely fails to describe the many ways in which teachers can work when, for example, using course books, or when adopting a task-based approach. (p. 79)

As was noted, practice comprises one of the basic principles of this approach which follows presentation. However, based on Lightbown (1985), SLA research demonstrates that practice does not necessarily lead to perfection. This criticism seems to be quite reasonable in that by having students merely practice a language structure, one cannot expect them to learn and internalize that language structure. Rather, students need to be provided with feedback by their teachers in order to diagnose the problematic areas to work more and to identify their strength in order to build up their later practices on its basis.

Another problem associated with this approach, according to Wong and Van Patten (2003) is that it relies heavily on the use of decontextualized and meaningless drills. A set of structural patterns in forms of language chunks are presented to the learners as models and learners have to produce them through pattern practice and repetition.

Finally, according to Harmer (2001) it is teacher-centered and fits uneasily with more humanistic learner-centered frameworks. According to O'Hara (2003, cited Zhang & Atkin, 2010)

in humanistic education the goal of education is the facilitation of change and learning. Learning how to learn is more important than being taught something from the "superior" vantage point of a teacher who unilaterally decides what shall be taught. Brown (2007) remarks that, in humanistic learner-centered methodologies, teachers as facilitators must provide the nurturing context for learners to construct their meanings in interaction with others. These principles are clearly in contrast with the main premises of the PPP approach in which teachers are the authority and the model while the learners are considered as merely the passive recipients and practitioners of ready-made plans.

Due to these criticisms and problems mentioned above, as Richards and Renandya (2002) maintain, this approach was gradually replaced in the 1980s by teaching methods which focused on communication (rather than grammar) as the key dimension of learning and teaching. Early models of Communicative Language Teaching used functional units of organization and practice to replace grammatical ones; more recently, however, the unit of task has been proposed as an alternative to other units of presentation or practice.

These shifts of focus also had a significant influence on language syllabi. After the 1970s, grammatical syllabuses were superseded by communicative ones based on functions or tasks; grammar-based methodologies such as presentation-practice-production (PPP) lesson format underlying the Situational Approach gave way to function-and skill-based teaching syllabi; and accuracy activities such as drills and grammar practice were replaced by fluency activities based on interactive-small group work. (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

3. Concluding Remarks

As was discussed through this paper the PPP popularized as an approach or teaching model during 1950s and1960s underlying such teaching methodologies as grammar-translation, audiolingual and situational teaching method. The main purpose behind this method was to raise language learners capable of producing grammatical language chunks through excessive pattern practice and repetition drills. With communication coming to be noticed as the major goal of language learning, a great number of criticisms were posed against this approach.

However, like any other teaching methodology, certain advantages can be sought within this method which may recommend the three Ps approach as a good choice to be utilized in certain circumstances. This approach, based on Richards and Rodgers (2001) solve many of the problems beginning teachers have to struggle with, because many of the basic decisions about what to teach and how to teach it have already been made for them. The PPP prescriptions of present, practice, and produce "offers to the novice teacher the reassurance of a detailed set of sequential steps to follow in the classroom" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 246).

Harmer (1998) in his article, *Default settings: What models do for trainees*, mentions that novice teachers and trainees, need clear models, just as computer users rely, initially, on default settings. He believes that default settings are a good metaphor for the role of the trainer in pre-service training where trainees are offered a clear model or models to hang onto and from which they can develop and grow. The default setting that has most commonly been applied to pre-service training is, of course, PPP (Harmer, 1998).

Based on Carless (2009) low achieving students probably learn better through traditional methods, such as P-P-P. The PPP, based on the used terminology throughout the whole article, has been referred to in the literature mostly as an approach or teaching method; however, what seems to be the reality is that it can be utilized as a useful technique with a variety of teaching methodologies from the audiolingual to the most common types of communicative approaches. For instance, regardless of the method used it can be utilized as a helpful technique with beginning learners and in teaching pronunciation. In terms of explaining grammar, this technique is clear-cut and condensed, through which the main points can be taught easily. Students are normally weak in grammar so we need to use P-P-P to help them improve their grammatical accuracy.

According to Lindsay and Knight (2006) even many CLT classrooms used a PPP model of teaching, but the original model has been developed and modified since it was first introduced and no longer represents CLT as the only teaching model. Evans (2008) agreed that "PPP has evolved over the years, cherry picking the more attractive elements of other approaches, and incorporating them into its basic format" (p. 22). Swan (2005) defends P-P-P as a useful routine for presenting and practicing structural features under semi-controlled conditions.

In spite of the emphasis on meaning and on real world communication rather than grammar and hence the emergence of communicative approaches and most recently the task-based language teaching, to our surprise, some scholars move back to old PPP practices and see it as advantageous and superior. Eric, an authoritative writer on TBLT, remarks:

> Task-based teaching is complex for teachers to get their heads round and also complex to implement. Even if you are an informed and committed devotee it would still be difficult to implement. It is easy to get your head around P-P-P because the psycholinguistic theory (if there is such a thing) is simple: practice makes perfect. And you have the immense advantage that you can teach a P-P-P approach simply by following the textbook. A big advantage of a P-P-P approach is that it denies differences between learners; it licenses you to downplay those differences. In contrast, for TBLT you have to get your head round a theory that has not yet been fully articulated. A further challenge for a task-based approach is that it forces you to confront the way learners are at different levels and you need to have a methodology that allows you to respond to diversity in your classroom. So a task-based approach forces a teacher to confront difficult problems that are currently not solvable. (Cited in Carless, 2009, p. 59)

Moreover Gladys (Cited in Carless, 2009, p. 61) commented as follows:

> Teachers dare not take the risk of bringing new things into the classroom, the risk of getting worse results. They stick to the methods that have been used in the past, whatever results have been achieved they dare not take the risk unless you can show them that TBLT works.

To conclude this paper, most of the articles available in the literature have dealt with the problems and deficiencies of PPP as an old approach leading to the old methods of GTM and Audiolingualism. However, what is true is that PPP can be regarded as a useful technique utilized even in communicative approaches and bearing many advantages as were discussed in the aforementioned sentences.

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