A Critical Review of Presentation, Practice and Production Task-based Language and Lexical Approaches

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Abstract

Although the Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP henceforth) has been criticised by a number of academics such as Lewis, (1996) and Willis (1996), it is still prevalent in second language acquisition and very popular in several situations, since it is easy to master and an effective technique for managing large classes. Therefore, several attempts have been made both by researchers and language instructors to find and use of the most efficient teaching practices aimed at enhancing language production and affecting learning outcomes in a positive way. Therefore, this article aims to examine the critical opinions about (PPP). Two proposed alternatives are discussed in terms of support in accordance with their broad usage, application and constraints; then the conclusion to the discussion is stated. The paper suggests that if learners' needs and expectations are known and considered in the pre-planning stages of lessons, any language teaching model may be favourable for teachers.

Keywords: The PPP, the TBL, Lexical Approach, Criticism and alternatives, Advantages and Implications.

1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that teaching any foreign/second language aimed at the ability for every student to effectively understand and communicate with people who use that particular language for any number of different purposes. Teachers need to help learners develop the ability from the basic stages to ever increasing degrees of competence until they reach the level of proficiency for their intended and expected usages. In order to achieve this goal, 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. As a result, various approaches, methods and procedures in language teaching have been utilized. It is because no methodology is supported constantly, even eclectic approaches sometimes fail to create an ideal lesson type that achieve the learning outcomes. So that, there is an obvious debate which has developed over which approaches to structuring, planning and implementing lessons are more effective.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go further details about the critical points which could be behind the survival and failure of any approach and methods. The purpose is not to choose one approach over the other, but to look at the PPP) which has traditionally been considered an appropriate and successful means of teaching a foreign or second language, and then has increasingly been criticized due to its failure to enable a number of students to communicate effectively after following such a conventional programme of language learning and its failure to take into account the research findings of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (D. Willis, 1990; Long and Crookes, 1992; Lewis, 1996; Skehan, 1996a/b; Willis, 2005; Willis and Willis, 2007). Critics have instead advocated several approaches such as Tasked based Language (TBL) and Lexical Approaches, which have in turn been

challenged in its particular application to language teaching in foreign/second language context.

This paper, therefore, attempts to look at the issues behind the using PPP, the main critic points by various perspectives, and go into further details about the issues and reasons of implementing other approaches instead of using PPP. To reach this, this study has explored the background of PPP, the main drawbacks issues followed by the suggested alternatives such as Task- Based Language and Lexical Approach that have been advocated after the sustained attacks for PPP. Also, some implications were pointed out both for language teachers and learners due to the using of Task- Based Language and Lexical Approach. Finally, the conclusion where the summary of the paper's main findings are presented.

2. PPP Approach

The sequence PPP stands for Presentation, Practice, and Production. To elaborate further on these terms, Harmer (2001) states that at the beginning of the acquisition process a teacher discusses and introduces the material for the new lesson, creating realistic situations that are taken from context. In the presentation stage, the learners actively participate in acquiring new linguistic terms; developing their previous knowledge and using it in a correct structure. Then, the learners practise the language with controlled and freer activities, such as repeating the new items in chorus or individually. Finally, the teacher gives an activity that supports the learners in practising freely and confidently the new language item(s); ensuring also that students have understood how to use them and manipulate the form.

The PPP sequence is still very much practised, and this is for a variety of reasons. One is that it helps the teacher to control the content and the pace of the lesson. Its logic permits teachers and teacher trainers to readily control both the content and the pace of the lesson, and to identify the role of the teacher in the classroom (Thornbury, 1999). It gives teachers the much needed structure,

comfort and a secure framework by which to transmit chosen material, to manage the class and to maintain certain predictability. For instance, teachers can take an everyday structure, organise it and use it in a way that ensures students understand the new structure. The key problem with this explanation, particularly as it is experienced at elementary level, is that this sequence leads to considerable expenditure of time, deciding on the necessary language, the most useful way of presenting the language and creating a suitable atmosphere to promote the learner's engagement.

A further positive reason for using PPP is its ability to generate clear and tangible lesson goals, an accurate syllabus and comfortable assessment systems (Skehan, 1996). In this approach, the students can learn what is taught, and what has been taught, encouraging them as they start and continue in their studies. The results from any assessment reveal a good general standard and students typically do not face problems passing the syllabus, since the testing requirements have been covered by the more than adequate syllabus (ibid). However, this method only assesses the manipulated language form and not the wider use. As it is most commonly experienced, PPP is likely to be preferred with lower levels at secondary school since the students require grammatical knowledge in order to speak the language with proficiency. Furthermore, at such a level it is important that learners understand the input not only upon exposure but also so as to use the language practically and obtain the comprehensible output.

3. Issues with PPP

Despite the popularity of PPP in the field of language teaching, from the 1990s onwards, this approach has come under sustained attack from academics and researchers (Harmer, 2007). Some of the major problems and drawbacks of the PPP approach are discussed next. According to Skehan (1996), the process of the three PPP stages raises two areas of doubt. First, it is advisable students should be given enough opportunities to practice the new structure of the language, for example, various activities that help

them to use the language productively. Thus, it is not an easy process to encourage students to internalise a new structure and therefore, the readiness of the students to communicate and use the language items in a natural context remains unachievable, however, this is not a weak point for PPP. It simply shows that the production exercise was badly prepared and if the students still cannot cope with the targeted structure in the controlled practice stage then the production phase should not have been given. Thus, this is not a critical point against PPP but shows an overestimated stage by the teacher to continue with an activity in which the students were not at an appropriate level to involve in.

Second, the teacher cannot move to the next stage until the students understand the meaning and the construction of the form. This, then, is a problem since the instructions that are given by the teacher and found in materials and textbooks might not always beneficial in supporting the oral proficiency of the students. Thornbury (1999) asserted that the preparation of learners to communicate is a lengthy process in which considerable time can elapse before they are perfectly capable of expressing the intended meaning in a fluent way. As a result of this, communication cannot be achieved until the students learn the new forms which are essential for communication. Therefore, this requires consideration in teaching and when preparing lessons. Again, this is not a reasonable criticism as it is part of the natural learning process to internalize the structure. Of course, as a teacher in Libyan context, it is required from students to produce natural sounding language, but this naturalness will develop as the students continue their studies and as they become more proficient a point will be reached when the students are no longer in a practice phase.

Another issue that arises is the gap between teaching and learning (Ranalli, 2001). Learners are exposed to the language, which is presented in a particular activity in the classroom and is inadequate and does not take place in real communicative use. For example, learners might be able to understand the target language, which is presented and carefully controlled by the teacher inside the classroom; however, it can be difficult for students to transfer

this input into output because it gives an "illusion of mastery" (Willis, 1996). Personally, this researcher does not find a problem with this as it can take any number of exposures and use of any structure before students can fully integrate it into their transitional competence (Corder, 1967), a notion that similarly means the current term 'interlanguage' that was introduced by the American linguist Larry Selinker in 1972). This is true not only of a PPP procedure but also of other lessons using different styles of teaching including TBL (Task-Based learning).

Although the students try to make sense using the new construction in combination with the foreign language they have already learnt; this would not naturally become part of their communicative performance, since the learning process is not controlled and restricted by an ordered structure. However, the learning process is natural and random and this is the predictable assumption behind how learners develop (Harmer, 2001). It is suggested that there should be further activities that help and encourage students to use the language in real time communication. Thus, the learners could be taught through both input and output, since the learning process is a transformation-activity process. As Willis (1996) pointed out, learners should be exposed to language, which varies in form and which is at the edge of their comprehension (whilst remaining comprehensible).

What is more, Willis (1996: 135) states, "the PPP cycle restricts the learner's experience of language by focusing on a single item."   Similarly, (PPP) is based on a synthetically - sequenced system in which language is broken down into structural components and does not reflect how languages are learnt (e.g. Ellis 1993a; Lewis 1993; Willis 1994; Skehan 1998 Krashen 1982). But, in the Libyan context where English is a foreign language, this criticism does not invalidate PPP and misses the point of the procedure. It (PPP) is a series of steps that helps and supports the student as they move from a state of no knowledge of the language to a position of greater proficiency and if a student is subsequently able to use the targeted grammatical structure within a controlled practice exercise and later in a freer

exercise then progress has been made. Certainly, the final P on the initial contact with the structure will unlikely be totally free, and this researcher thinks it is highly unrealistic for Willis to expect such an outcome, but the learner has made progress and it is the job of the teacher to give opportunities later for the student to re-use the structure in more open activities, which is where this researcher believes tasks play a vital role, and help the student develop from a novice to a proficient user of the structure.

Another problem associated with this approach, according to Lewis (1993) is 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 imitative a model in a fixed linear order without paying attention to the inherent complexities of the language itself as well in the teaching/learning process. In other words, as Skehan (1996) states that language learning does not occur in a linear fashion influenced directly by the instruction that takes place. Alternatively, it is a complex process in which many factors including learners' cognitive and affective characteristics are important. Of course students do not acquire language linearly, and although there are relatively fixed developmental sequences in learning, for example, with negation, questions, possessive determiners, relative clauses and the past (Lightbown and Spada, 2006) there will be individual differences in the rate at which individuals acquire the target language.

4. Suggested Alternatives

In response to these criticisms, many scholars have offered variations on PPP and alternatives to it (Harmer, 2007). The alternatives to the PPP approach model are Task-based Approach, the Lexical Approach, Communicative language teaching and the model of OHE (Observe, Hypothesize, Experiment , III (Illustration, Interaction, Induction) , TTT (Test, Teach, Test), TBLT (Task- Based Language Teaching, ESA (engage, study, activate). Due to the lack of time only two alternatives will be discussed, to allow for a more in-depth critical examination in

view of the word limit because of their correlating with the PPP model and these are Task Based Learning (TBL) and the Lexical Approach.

The Task Based Learning (TBL) became popular in the field of language in the last decade of the 20th century. It was proposed as a result of second language acquisition research surrounding several classroom activities; it is based on meaning. Skehan (1996:20) defined the word 'tasks' to refer to those activities whose meaning(s) is (are) their primary focus. He also indicated the difference between the sequence of PPP and TBL in terms of the learning process; the learning process in the PPP sequence is described "as learning a series of discrete items and then bringing these items together in communication to provide further practice and consolidation." Whereas, in TBL it is described "as one of learning through doing – it is by primarily engaging in meaning that the learner's system is encouraged to develop." This means that a task has a context as the central component in the language classroom in order to encourage learners to more effectively and more actively participate in the language learning and acquisition process.

The TBL framework and the sequence of the three Ps are radically different. According to Willis (1996), a TBL's framework should include the following stages: pre-task stage, task cycle stage, and language focus stage, all with their own purpose. In contrast to PPP, the production stage occurs in the initial stages of the lesson in the TBL, helping the learners to put into words the meaning they would like to express. In other words, there are more opportunities for the students to become exposed to the target language by starting a communicative task with previous knowledge and experience; for example, personal experience or intellectual challenge. Thus, this approach provides a more learner-centred rather than teacher-centred environment when contrasted with the PPP sequence. Therefore, it perhaps also gives the teacher greater flexibility to move with the dynamism in the classroom while monitoring. However, as mentioned earlier, if the task is being set up for teaching new language structures for real-life

communicative situations then this researcher would have thought of introducing relevant grammar prior to the task which would greatly facilitate the successful completion of the task and provide the students with a greater sense of achievement of having learnt something new and be able to use the targeted structure for a realistic communicative activity where meaning is central. How can a novice learner talk about something without first being presented with the requisite language? TBL is not appropriate for the Libyan context where English is a foreign language and is difficult for the beginner level learners to master language at the beginning of the lesson. Ellis (2004) stated that what is appropriate for a second language teaching context may not be appropriate for a foreign language context.

Another point in favour of TBL is that it generally has a positive effect on students, encouraging them to be more motivated since they are involved in active learning. Careless (2004) suggested that students find tasks more motivating since they perform them in pairs or small groups and practise whatever items and language they wish to convey the meaning of, in contrast with the three Ps' approach which is too linear and is not concerned with the development of learners' readiness. One major issue in the TBL frame is in the pre-task stage. In this stage, the topic is introduced and the students are helped to rehearse the relevant items; however, a large amount of new vocabulary or particular grammatical forms are then taught. Another point here is that it is expected that the teacher should be able to give appropriate feedback to students; thus, it is difficult for new teachers or those who have very little experience to effectively implement this approach. Task-Based Learning is seen as difficult to implement by non-native speaking teachers whose L2 oral proficiency is uncertain Ellis (2004).

During teaching the Grammar course in BA programme at Sirte University (2017-2018), it was noticed that this approach is used most effectively in a small sized classroom as a way to encourage and enhance students' communicative abilities as the primary aim of second language acquisition. This was reflected

best in situations where the learners feel free to maintain use of the target language throughout the discussion. However, in the case of a teacher with limited experience in the education system this approach cannot successfully be applied in all teaching contexts where some learners are required only to pass exams and not necessarily expected to speak fluently or develop their communicative skills. As Yasuhiko (2008:19) states: "In such a situation tasks may not be a motivating factor, and so TBL frameworks may not have as much effect on students' learning as they have in other contexts."

Another alternative to PPP is the Lexical Approach, which was proposed and popularised by Michael Lewis (1993). Lewis (1993) asserted that it consisted of multi-word prefabricated chunks which are formed by collocations, idioms, fixed and semi-fixed phrases. It refers to the belief that language learning is not based on grammar, functions and notions as in the PPP, but it is based on lexis, or words and word combinations (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). That is to say that this approach focuses more attention on the lexicon, how it is formed and organised. Unlike PPP, the Lexical Approach helps the learner to build up their vocabulary stores through understanding the meaning of each word and its usage, and this is an acquired skill. It is related to the psycholinguistic view of the structure of the mind and how it stores language chunks as individual items. When the teacher introduces a word, they will adequately put it into, and explain it in, a context; ensuring students will not only understand its pragmatic meaning, but also how to use it and where to expect it. Lewis (1993) exemplifies the manner in which this might be used to teach and engage the learners; focusing on the use of *will* in a series of 'archetypical utterances' such as *I'll get it, I'll give you a ring, I'll be in touch* rather than teaching them short form and future form. However, there is not enough explanatory evidence regarding "how the learning of fixed and semi-fixed phrases can be incorporated into the understanding of a language system" (Harmer, 2007, 75).

Lexical Approach might be time consuming and quite difficult for lower levels since they would not be able to manipulate and memorise the words in new forms. Furthermore, they might ask questions during explanations. To solve these issues teachers should know the extent of previous inputs, have an awareness of how their students learn according to their different perceptions, and be confident in solving any common difficulties and answering questions. Yet, it has been observed in the technical English for the computing specialist, that this approach is suitable for those who study an ESP course, such as computing or business and so on. It is thought that it is more effective to use the PPP approach with students at lower levels rather than using the Lexical Approach since language is complex and the learners need to understand the basic rules as a foundation of learning.

One of the fundamental principles of the Lexical Approach lies in raising the awareness of the students and developing their ability to 'chunk' language successfully, which is also referred to as a central element of language teaching (Lewis, 1993). It is clear that the main concentration of this approach is on learners' paying attention to the language in use through an understanding of the natural lexis that occurs in the language. Furthermore, effective communication is based on the ability to produce natural language which also depends on mastering lexis. Thus, the ability to produce lexical phrases is the main aspect of language acquisition as it helps the learner to perceive the features of language, including patterns and morphology (ibid).

In contrast to the PPP sequence, the Lexical Approach gives the learners a range of language such as collocation and fixed expression and the ability to encounter it comfortably outside the classroom (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). It helps them to memorise and reuse language, using different activities such as gap filling, or matching exercises or finding synonyms. However, teaching different items and their relationship is not easy since learners need to understand the basic grammar of the words to develop their own structures. To address this problem, it is

suggested that teachers should be willing to supply new ideas and be innovative.

It could be said that the learners could have a reasonable ability to produce lexical phrases from long chunks, which in turn helps them to realise the features of language. As it is experienced when studying English courses at a higher level, language has many thousands of chunks (words, collocations and fixed-expression) which would perhaps be a kind of implication in learning language since all these items are required to be taught. Yet, the classroom is not always the most effective place to learn all these items because informal learning takes place as a main source to acquire the majority of language, as stated by Lewis (1996, 12): "language is acquired exclusively by exposure of some kind. All the language skills, including productive skills, are acquired from listening and reading."

5. Conclusion

As it was discussed through this paper the PPP is popular as an approach or teaching model during 1950s and1960s. The major strength of PPP is that it is a very logical procedure to language learning. It is clearly investigated that any perceived failings in PPP are not due to its intrinsic logic, but to the way practitioners have implemented it, as was the case with an unsuccessful implementation of TBLT in Hong Kong (Ellis, 2009: 240-241). In addition, it is noticeable that PPP still survives in language learning as it is easy for inexperienced teachers to implement and effective for managing large classes. The framework of TBL is ideal for students who already have a solid grounding in grammar and need the opportunity to practise using their language for purposeful communication where errors and gaps in their inter-language can be identified and later corrected to prevent fossilization. The framework is also ideal for revision and assessing students' communicative abilities. However, this researcher finds the framework unconvincing when it comes to introducing new target language with the re-ordering of the PPP cycle and the danger of the report phase taking too long. The

Lexical Approach is effective for ESP groups but is not successful in conversation classes and there is a concern regarding its implementation. In summary, it is concluded that PPP should not be totally ignored and as shown is fully compatible with tasks, which are extremely important for language learning. So, teachers themselves have the final decision regarding using different methods or combining different approaches, since what is appropriate for one class would not be effective for another.

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