

## **`COMMUNICATIVE' ACTIVITIES AND THE `PRESENTATION, PRACTICE, PRODUCTION (PPP)' LESSON FORMAT**

**Andrew Daventry**

### **Abstract**

*The presentation, practice, production (PPP) lesson format is one which is very widely used. In fact, many teachers seem to regard it as the basic format. However, it can be very difficult to implement. The main problem is finding properly `communicative' activities for the `production stage'. The aim of this article is to investigate the relationship between PPP and the `communicative approach', define the terms involved, and look at the implications for lesson planning.*

### **Introduction**

For busy teachers, the best time for dealing with a theoretical issue is when it becomes a practical problem. There are a large number of books and articles on communicative language teaching, many of which require serious and careful reading to understand the issues involved. Many teachers, and trainers, do not have the time and even the patience to wade through difficult texts that may turn out not to have any direct relevance to their work. Furthermore, these texts can be contradictory. Widdowson, for example, may say `A', while Candlin says `B'. The reader has to spend a great deal of time thinking through the issues for him or herself.

So, many ideas inevitably come second-hand to the classroom and training course. New ideas become tacked on to old ideas, despite contradictions, and the mismatch of ideas can remain uninvestigated for years. However, after a while this mismatch becomes a serious problem. Then, the theoretical issues have to be dealt with. One such issue is the `communicative' activity at the end of a `PPP' lesson. Teachers find themselves faced with the question of how to design an activity which is both communicative (i.e., the focus of the task is on using the target language to communicate) and also generates a large number of examples of the target structure. "After all," they point out, "If we tell our students to use a particular structure, then the activity becomes language focused. They become more concerned with getting the language right than with using it!"

First, we will look at the presentation, practice, production (PPP) lesson format (which is also frequently referred to as `presentation, controlled practice, free practice'), and see what assumptions concerning language learning it is based on. Then we will look at the assumptions behind `communicative activities', and see how the two sets of assumption fit in with each other.

### **What is the PPP lesson format?**

PPP is a way of staging lessons in which new language is to be dealt with. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the terms were first used, and it is probably the case that the `traditional' PPP format outlined below has grown up over the years through numerous teaching and training courses, being argued, tweaked and polished by many teachers and trainers. Certainly, no one individual can claim to have originated the format.

The basic format goes like this:

1. The teacher presents the new language to the learners.
2. The learners practise getting the new language right through a sequence of controlled practice activities.
3. The learners practise using the new language to communicate freely.

On the face of it, this is a logical sequence. You can't use language to communicate unless you have the language in the first place. This means you should practise the language first before you practice using it. And, before you can practice the language, of course, you need to be exposed to it.

### **Assumptions behind PPP**

I would like to discuss two major assumption behind the PPP lesson format. The first is the view that, in language teaching and learning, language is reducible to its component parts. The second is the assumption that free expression of meaning follows on from mastery of the form of the language.

#### ***Language is reducible to its component parts***

The most important assumption is that language can be presented in terms of its component parts to learners who can master them, through practice, and then learn to use them, in production. This necessarily requires a synthetic approach to syllabus and lesson planning, in which the units of study are linguistic (see e.g. Wilkins 1976, Nunan 1988). The elements of language that can be so isolated include:

1. Structures
2. Morphology
3. Pronunciation, word and sentence stress and intonation
4. Functions (i.e. it is possible to present, for example, ways of giving advice)
5. Notions (i.e. it is possible to present, for example, ways of talking about time, or quantity)
6. Appropriacy/ register (that is, the elements which make language formal or informal, polite, businesslike, etc. etc.)

The primacy of meaning is maintained by ensuring that all language presented is done so through a context, which will illustrate this meaning. See, for example, Haycraft (1978), Byrne (1976), Harmer (1983).

***Language to be used in communication can be specifically presented and practised***

It is assumed that the language to be used in the production stage needs to be practised first in a controlled way. Success in the production stage depends on adequate practice. There is not a great deal of disagreement amongst writers on the nature of this practice. Jane Willis (1981) says that the practice stage:

*"...begins when students begin to repeat the new [language] items..." (p.188)*

and goes from "controlled to freer" activities (it must be noted here that Jane Willis now explicitly, and vigorously, rejects these views<sup>1</sup>). Donn Byrne (op.cit.) speaks of:

*"..practice in the manipulation of the fixed elements of the language." (p.9)*

From this, it would seem that practice is more or less equated with structure practice. Examples of activities for the practice stage would include choral drilling, putting the correct form of a verb into a gap, and imposed dialogues. However, it is clear (cf. Byrne op.cit.) that practice is intended to be meaningful; the distinction between mechanical and meaningful drills is clearly drawn. Julian Dakin (1973), in what has become a classic treatment of language practice, also strongly emphasises this point.

In a later handbook for teachers (Matthews et. al. 1985), and one clearly influenced by developments in communicative teaching, Mary Spratt characterises the 'practice or accuracy practice stage' as an:

*...opportunity to use the newly presented language in a controlled framework so as to allow [the learners] to memorise its form and assimilate its meaning more fully." (p.8)*

More fully, that is, than merely being exposed to a presentation would allow. Spratt notes that suitable language practice activities would include drills, but also points out that:

*"...recently, however, [the practice stage] has come to include interactive communicative activities between students." (p.8-9)*

'Controlled' in the first quotation means that the language used in exercises is controlled by the teacher either directly (as with a choral drill) or indirectly (through the make-up of a pairwork activity). It is also seen here as being necessary for learners to have controlled practice in 'communication'. This, presumably, includes such activities as the 'information gap' activities referred to in Keith Johnson's article on 'Making drills communicative' (Johnson 1982), where one learner has information the other does not. Working in pairs, the information is transferred from one student to another. Here, although the learners are clearly practising forming correct sentences, they are also seeing how such sentences may be used to exchange information.

Donn Byrne suggests that, in order to achieve fluency, which he characterises as:

*"... the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably accurately, and without undue hesitation." (op.cit:9)*

Learners need complementary training in 'the expression of personal meaning'. In the production stage, says Byrne:

*"... students say what they want to say, not what they are directed to say." (p.78)*

One way of achieving this is through "personalisation" activities in a lesson. In such activities, the learner is encouraged to use the target structures to say things that are

personally relevant. This, apart from anything else, encourages a real investment in the language on the part of the learner.

Here, however, the PPP model runs into problems. These activities will not necessarily lead learners to 'want' to use language if they are obviously aimed at eliciting accurate sentences. It is clear that in controlled information gap activities, learners say what the (frequently quite contrived) activity requires of them, in the way the activity requires it. In an information gap activity which uses, for example, train timetable information, the learners will use the present simple for future schedules because they are required to use it, not because they 'want' to use it. Furthermore, 'personalisation' activities which require the students to produce accurate language may increase learner investment in a lesson, but do nothing to hand the choice of language forms to be used over to the learner.

More recently, Mary Spratt, who is a proponent of a very common 'communicative' approach to PPP in which the expression of meaning has been firmly tied to the idea of 'communication', addresses the question of how a teacher can get the student to 'want' to say what the teacher wants him or her to say. Her suggestion is this:

*"What is important is that the teacher constructs these activities in such a way that they promote communication and yet ensure that the new language occurs unprompted, naturally and frequently..." (Matthews et al, op.cit.: 15)*

We focus on the task, and trust to the logic of the activity to bring out the target language. The teacher 'tricks' the learners into using the target language. And this is the problem. Can they be tricked? How many times have teachers created activities carefully designed to ensure that language occurs 'unprompted, naturally and frequently' only to find that either it doesn't occur at all, or the students have turned the activity into controlled practice, and are sitting busily writing sentences using the target structure? It might be very, very common for native speakers to use suppressed conditionals to describe their dream house ("It would have seventeen rooms, and would look out over the sea..."), but in a classroom activity, you are just as likely to hear straight present tenses ("...it has seventeen rooms..."). The students completely avoid the target language. The learners personal meanings and the target structures just do not coincide.

So, how do you get personal meaning into the production stage, and ensure that learners are focused on communication while also ensuring that the target language occurs? I believe that the short answer is that you can't. It is not possible to predict what specific language items a speaker will attempt to use in a particular speech event, except statistically, in the case of a native speaker. That is, native speakers, brought up in similar speech communities, and having a similar full command of the vocabulary and grammar of their native language<sup>2</sup>, will tend to use particular language items for particular functions. Learners, however, have a partial, and widely variable, language system. There is no way that you can design an activity guaranteed to lead learners to use a given structure spontaneously, when that design is based on what native speakers tend to do. And, assuming that the native speaker norm is the target, there is no other basis for predicting language use.

It would seem that much too much has been required of the PPP lesson format. Let's go back to Jane Willis, who says that in production activities:

*"... students make up their own dialogues, or do a role-play without much help from the teacher." (op.cit.: 188)*

Production, for Willis, is free in the sense that students are in control of what they say, and are on their own in saying it. However, it is not their personal meaning being said. The students are still mainly concerned to produce accurate language.

This is what PPP is all about. It is a lesson format, and a very powerful one, that can help learners learn how to produce sentences in which target structures are used accurately and, perhaps, appropriately, with the learner developing a mastery of the structures involved. Personal meaning has no place in PPP. If there is any genuine communication going on in a pair or group activity, it will be incidental to the target language, and will concern the procedures involved ("...No, this doesn't look right", "... I'm sure this must be the gerund...", "... Let's do number three now..."). The 'unprompted, natural and frequent' use of target language that Mary Spratt, and many other teachers and trainers are looking for is a phantom. It is unobtainable. The desire for it is, I think, based on a misunderstanding arising from a conflating of structural<sup>3</sup> lesson formats (such as PPP) and communicative ideas which implicitly reject structural syllabuses.

### **Communicative principles**

There have been many attempts to create communicative syllabuses, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to review them all. The aim of this section is to look at certain communicative principles which have been influential. I will attempt to show how these principles involve language learning outside the scope of the structural syllabus, and therefore outside the PPP format.

### **Communicative competence.**

It is generally accepted that the aim of language learning for most learners is to achieve communicative competence. This has been succinctly defined as comprising:

1. *linguistic competence...involving grammar and vocabulary.*
2. *Discourse competence...involving the ability to apply language rules in particular functions.*
3. *Sociolinguistic competence, being the ability to use language appropriately in situations.*
4. *Strategic competence being specific strategies, such as gambits, end games and repair strategies, which enable a speaker to initiate and maintain communication.*

*(Coulthard 1985: 147)*

Only one component, linguistic competence, could involve explicit work on structures. At least two of these components, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, are not subject to a synthetic approach to language learning. Knowledge of language appropriacy and the knowledge which leads us to use particular language items for particular functions are acquired through familiarity with the target language culture as a whole. It is possible to create rules which say, for example, that you use "Could you...?" for polite requests, and "Can you...?" for more informal requests, but such rules do not get you very far. They have a very low predictive power. In other words, it is easy to find 'violations' of these rules - "Can you...?" used politely, and "Could you...?" used rather abruptly. Such knowledge is acquired through extended exposure to authentic examples of the target language (hence the

importance of using authentic reading, listening and video materials), and it develops holistically. PPP relies on language items being isolated, presented and practised. It is not a suitable tool for dealing with these holistic aspects of communicative competence.

### **Analytic syllabuses**

An analytic syllabus is one in which the units of study are not linguistic. The syllabus is not comprised of a series of language items. It consists of other units, perhaps 'notions' (see Wilkins 1976), or, more practically:

1. Topics                    such as housing, shopping or travelling.
2. Situations                in the bank, the restaurant or at cocktail parties.
3. Tasks                     such as discussing and coming to a conclusion on a point, or taking notes in a lecture.

The linguistic components of a course are subordinated to the topics, situations and tasks. Writers on communicative syllabus design realised early on that a communicative syllabus needs to be organised in units of language use, and we use language to achieve tasks, talk about topics, and handle situations.

Such syllabuses are analytic in this way: language items cannot be isolated, and reduced to their component parts, as with a synthetic structural syllabus., since the full meaning of the language arises out of the situation, topic or task. This is a holistic, top-down approach to learning. Language input reaches the learner through his analysing the way language is used in the situation. PPP is not a suitable lesson format, as what is being presented is not discrete language points, but, instead, the topic, task or situation in its entirety. Teachers who try to use analytically based materials in a PPP lesson format find themselves swamped by the sheer quantity of differing language points that they feel they have to present.

### **Accuracy and fluency**

These terms have been re-evaluated recently, particularly in Brumfit (1984: 50-68). This is where personal meaning comes in. According to Brumfit, accuracy refers to a focus on linguistic matters, while fluency refers to an ability to use the language. Language is a means to an end. In accuracy work, the learner is manipulating the language consciously, while in fluency work, the learner is focused on achieving a task, not on producing correct language. The language that the learner will produce in such tasks is personal. It is what he wants to say, and is therefore unpredictable. It will almost certainly deviate from a linguistic syllabus. It is not simply that we are being unrealistic in expecting learners to use particular language items in fluency work. The point is that the use of particular language items is irrelevant to fluency work. Learners are practising communicating, using all the linguistic resources at their command. Such activities are beyond the scope of the PPP lesson format.

### **The source of confusion**

This section is somewhat speculative. My question here is this: why have teachers tried to teach communicatively while basing their teaching on synthetic structural syllabuses when the clear implication of communicative principles is that such syllabuses can not provide a sufficient basis for communicative competence?

Perhaps the main reasons include these:

1. Early communicative materials were clumsy, unwieldy and unteachable. The insights of the applied linguists did not translate easily into usable coursebooks. Many coursebooks, indeed, translated the 'analytic' idea of a functional-notional syllabus into inventories of specified exponents for the various functions and notions, thereby transforming it, in practice, into a synthetic syllabus. Syllabuses based on language use proved difficult to characterise, and suitable methodology had not been developed.
2. The principles outlined above were not as clearly defined fifteen or twenty years ago as they are now. They have developed slowly over this period. I receive the distinct impression that it was felt that the 'language use' end of language learning could be handled by means of tacking a list of functions, such as making requests or refusing invitation, onto a structural syllabus.
3. There has been, and still is, a strong commitment worldwide on the part of teachers and course managers to inculcating, and testing, a knowledge of language. Such knowledge takes the form of a structural syllabus.
4. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, ideas tend to come second hand to teachers' trainers, and course organisers. These ideas can tend to become tacked on to existing ideas. They do not replace them, or even, necessarily lead teachers to re-evaluate their current practices. A case in point is the way in which Brumfit's (1984) distinction between accuracy and fluency referred to above has been seen as identical to the 'practice/production' distinction within the PPP format<sup>4</sup>.

This question is really a matter for empirical historical research. What is clear, however, is that certain influential writers on communicative language teaching have contributed, whether knowingly or unknowingly, to the illusion that PPP is a communicative teaching tool. Byrne (op.cit: 8-9), despite emphasising the fact that his use of the terms 'presentation, practice and production' refers to stages of the learning process, treats these stages in practice as aspects of the teaching process. Presentation and practice are pedagogically a preparation for communication in the production stage. Similarly, Littlewood (1981: 85-88), in a very widely read introduction to communicative language teaching, gives the clear impression that "pre-communicative" work, by which he means structural and controlled communication practice (e.g. controlled information gap activities) gives learners an opportunity to practice the specific language they will need to communicate with in a lesson. Even as late as 1989, David Nunan, who is one of the foremost current writers on Communicative language teaching, is proposing a task-based "psycholinguistic processing approach" to lesson staging which is, when all is said and done<sup>5</sup>, straight PPP (Nunan 1989: 118/9).

Such writers are confusing the undeniable fact that language must first be presented, then practised before it can be used for communication with a lesson planning prescription that language to be used for communication in a lesson can be presented and practised in that lesson.

## Conclusion

I have possibly given the impression that PPP is an out-of-date and unuseful lesson format. I hope not. My aim is simply to show PPP for what it is:- a powerful way of dealing with the

structures and, to a certain extent, the vocabulary of a language. PPP lesson formats should be used, and for at least two very good reasons:

1. There are times when explicit work on grammar is desirable. Structural syllabuses break down the grammar of a language into manageable chunks for learners. Analytic syllabuses give the learner no help in coming to terms with the grammar.
2. Contextualised presentations lead students to an explicit understanding of new language points in a way that allows slow, measured assimilation, allowing learners an opportunity to internalise new grammar in a methodical and 'user friendly' way.

But PPP and its attendant structural syllabus is not enough in itself. It is no substitute for exposing learners to examples of written and spoken language use. It is no substitute for task-based fluency work. Furthermore, the area of language learning relevant to PPP is a means to an end. Explicit knowledge of the structure of a language cannot be the purpose of language learning in itself, except for a select group of linguists and philologists. But performing tasks in a language, and handling texts in that language are ends in themselves.

So, keep structural syllabus, and the PPP lesson format, but keep it in its place as an adjunct to syllabuses based on the tasks, topics and situations that we need to learn language in order to handle. These last are the field of communicative language learning. PPP is PPP, and communication is something else.

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#### Notes:

1. See the introduction to the COBUILD English Course (Collins 1989).
2. See, for example, the similarities of native speakers' lexical networks (e.g. Aitchison 1987).
3. Here, 'structural' is used in the sense of being associated with a structural syllabus, not as a synonym for audio-lingual approaches.
4. I make this assertion on the basis of the training courses and seminars I have run and attended, and the teachers I have observed and worked with rather than on any published materials.
5. In fact, there is no suggestion on Nunan's part that the psycholinguistic processing approach means that learners are expected to use the language items present in the 'processing' stage for communication in the 'interaction' stage. However, the illustrative lesson provided by Nunan would be difficult to use any other way. The lesson is, in fact, a structural one on 'have got...'. If work on linguistic form is to arise out of the nature of a task, then Dave Willis' (1990) approach would seem more effective.



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