

In Issue 21 of *ETp*, Penny Ur invites teachers to look critically at professional literature and conference workshops by examining exactly what is being said, thinking about supporting evidence, and then relating it to their own experience to evaluate its usefulness. In this article, we accept that invitation by focusing on the often misrepresented Presentation-Practice-Production framework.

Challenge

There seems to be a message that a proper PPP lesson is self-contained and that students are ready to move on to another language area after running through the three stages. Ur alludes to this herself in that *'you cannot take language on board systematically bit by bit, practising and making perfect one thing before you proceed to practise and*

PPP under the microscope

**Brian Long and
Joshua Kurzweil**
examine a framework for
learning which is more
liberating than limiting.

Ur defends the PPP model, but does so in such a way that reveals a lingering misunderstanding of it and we feel that it is this misperception that has actually caused the sentiment that *'the Presentation-Practice-Production model is ineffective'*.

Misconception

The heart of the problem is the popularly-held belief, which Ur also argues, that PPP is 'essentially a set of teaching procedures'. We strongly disagree. It is our belief that PPP represents the process and stages students go through when they learn something, be it a grammar point, a lexical item, a skill, a function or anything else on the syllabus of an English course. PPP describes how students move towards achieving communicative goals in terms of what they do in order to learn, as well as being a guide for teachers in facilitating the learning process. Ur goes on to say that she has *'become more aware ... of the importance of including other types of teaching procedures: for example, ... lots of communicative tasks, where I may react to language problems as they come up, without any pre-planned connection to a grammatical or lexical syllabus'*. It is our contention that all of these can also be described in terms of the PPP model, which becomes extremely flexible when it is used to describe what students are doing, instead of prescribing what teachers should do.

make perfect the next'. Yet this is exactly the way in which many of us were trained to view PPP on our courses and we agree with Ur that it is this view of PPP that needs to be challenged. We feel that PPP, when seen as a 'way' of teaching, is responsible for teachers' dissatisfaction with this model and their coming to regard it as ineffective or passé.

The wording of the model itself is indicative of the problem of why PPP has been so misunderstood. It is usually read as an edict to the teacher. Ur writes: *'You present a new item (grammatical, lexical, whatever), then practise it in controlled contexts, and then invite students to produce their own written or spoken discourse using it.'*

Restrictions

Clearly the 'you' in the above statement is the teacher. In the second stage it is a bit fuzzier as to who is practising, although in the third stage the students are the actors, with the teacher setting up some kind of fluency activity that uses the language point of the lesson. The above definition also seems to be very linear, with the teacher presenting, leading the practice and setting up the production. Training courses often adopt a 'craft model' of training which focuses on being able to do these procedures 'correctly', instead of learning how to focus on student learning. Participants are evaluated on how they teach lessons that follow this model, a restriction which often

confounds teachers who try to design a lesson that meets the requirements of their course while at the same time trying to be responsive to their students' needs. The presumption seems to be that if the trainee follows the model correctly, the students will produce flawless language in the end. We disagree with this and see it as an overly simplistic and unrealistic perception of the learning process. We feel that one run through the PPP model as a set of teaching procedures, no matter how well they are executed, will very rarely, if ever, lead to successful learning for all of the students. We, and many teachers we have spoken with about PPP, felt

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that striving for a 'perfect PPP' established an unreal dynamic and unachievable goal that was ultimately responsible for our antipathy towards it. None of us enjoyed the frustration of perceived perpetual failure.

Flexibility

By looking at PPP in this light, the teacher no longer struggles to conform to a specific set of procedures, but rather looks at the lesson from the point of view of helping the students achieve communicative goals. In fact, when designing a PPP lesson we find it most effective to start with the student-centred goal and final communicative task. It is in this way that the teacher can best decide the focus of the present and practise activities. The PPP framework provides teachers with a shared vernacular when discussing their lessons and the students' learning. This kind of common language is at the heart of successful training courses.

From PPP to PPU

We refer to PPP as PPU (Use) to highlight that it is the students who are using the language to communicate. To understand PPU as a description of learning we have expanded each stage to encompass a wide variety of different types of student and teacher activity. To illustrate how these stages might look in a lesson, we have given examples of each from a lesson with the objective of teaching rejoinders (indications, verbal

or otherwise, that a listener is hearing, understanding and responding to what someone is saying to them).

P is for Presentation

Students need opportunities to get new language, and information about the form, meaning and use of that new language. The presentation of a language point requires a kind of focusing or 'noticing' by the teacher but does not prescribe who is actually presenting. Students may have their own questions about language which can be the focus of the lesson or it may be the teacher's responsibility to contextualise the language point and

relate it to the students. Students become active participants in this stage. They can notice language on their own (ie guided discovery) and/or contribute their ideas through an elicitation activity in which they are presenting to each other, thus peer teaching. This presentation phase, then, is really the moment when students focus on language in context. Michael Lewis, in his own framework 'Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment', referred to this stage as 'observing'. While this very nicely describes the individual learner's activity, it fails to capture the nature of the entire classroom dynamic.

Sample lesson:

(Objective: students will be able to use rejoinders to talk about holidays)

- 1 *Teacher has a conversation with a student. Teacher uses rejoinders, nodding, active listening.*
- 2 *Teacher has a conversation with the student again, staring blankly, using no rejoinders or encouraging noises.*
- 3 *Students discuss in pairs or small groups the difference between the two conversations.*
- 4 *Teacher elicits/Students brainstorm more rejoinders. Teacher demonstrates correct pronunciation and writes the rejoinders on the board.*

It is clear from this example that the presentation stage can be interactive, with both the teacher and students doing the presenting. It is also quite

natural to alternate between presentation and practice, building up students' knowledge of intonation and meaning, for example. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to see what rejoinders the students already know and what they need to learn in order to use them.

P is for Practice

The teacher must set up the practice activity, but the students are the ones who actually do the practising. The key to a successful practice activity is that it focuses the students on the form, meaning and use of the language point. In Lewis' framework, this is the point when individual students hypothesise about the language. They explore the limits of its form, meaning and use. In addition, they are given time at this stage simply to remember the new language point by working with it over and over, which from a student perspective is of paramount importance.

Sample lesson continued:

- 5 *The students begin with a cloze exercise, putting rejoinders in the correct blanks and practising the conversation using the correct intonation.*
- 6 *The teacher says really with different intonation patterns and students guess the feeling, eg rising = happy about good news. The students then do the same activity in pairs.*
- 7 *In pairs, students take turns reading a sentence while their partner listens, chooses the appropriate rejoinder and uses the correct pronunciation.*
- 8 *In pairs, students take turns reading a sentence while their partner listens and responds with what they think is the correct rejoinder and the correct intonation. Some of the sentences have blanks, which the reader fills in with their own information.*

The students move from controlled to freer practice, recalling the correct rejoinders as well as pronunciation and intonation, further committing them to memory. These are all defined as practice activities because true communication is not taking place. Students are simply being asked to respond correctly with rejoinders as they work on their form, meaning and use. Notice how the teacher can choose to flip back and forth between presentation and practice. For example, in stage 6 the teacher quickly presents more information about the pronunciation of rejoinders and follows it up with a pairwork practice. ▶▶▶

PPP under the microscope

U is for Use

As Ur states, the teacher now invites students to do some kind of communicative task which requires using the language point. This stage is critical in that the teacher cannot be certain that the students have in fact learned the language point until they use it freely to communicate. This stage helps students contextualise and personalise the language point, which in turn helps them remember it so that they can use it unconsciously in the future. For teachers, this stage is also critical because it allows them to assess the degree to which students have mastered the language point, providing them with valuable feedback for future lessons.

It also allows the teacher to see what additional language areas need to be worked on. One of the roles of the teacher in the use stage is to observe quietly how students are communicating and the language they are using.

Sample lesson continued:

9 *By themselves, students think about a holiday they have had, and write a few notes.*

10 *In pairs, students talk about a recent travel experience, responding to one another with rejoinders.*

By providing the opportunity to use rejoinders while talking about their holidays, the teacher can see the degree to which students have really learned them.

Errors

The role and importance of errors in the learning process cannot be underestimated in either the practice or use stages. Contrary to traditional dogma, it is in fact expected that students will make errors during the use stage. The question is not *whether* students will make errors, but rather *when* and *how* the teacher chooses to deal with them. Errors are dealt with differently in the practice and use stages and it is how the teacher chooses to respond to them that is critical in how they impact the students' learning.

In the practice stage, students are focusing on the actual form, meaning and use of the language, and so teacher control and interruption is more overt. This is where students test and explore the limits of what has been presented.

In the use stage, students are focused on communicating, which means the teacher allows them to make mistakes, or risks changing the focus of the activity back to language and essentially making it an unfocused practice activity.

Ultimately, PPU is about noticing options, so teachers can choose to suspend the use activity in order to do a mini present and practise where only a quick fix is required. Then the use activity can be resumed. However, if student errors require a more lengthy presentation and practice, the teacher might choose just to let the use activity reach its conclusion uninterrupted. In this way, the use activity gives the teacher valuable data on what the next lesson should focus on and what language needs to be presented and/or re-presented. The key to working with PPU is that it offers options, as teachers strive to help their students learn.

Spiral

If the use activity goes uninterrupted, it can be seen as a test (as in Test = Use, Teach = Present and Practise, Test = Use) and provides the teacher with valuable data on what other language areas the students need to work on. By looking at PPU as a cycle, or cycles, which the learner keeps running through, both in a single class as well as an entire course, it can be seen as a tremendous aid not only in lesson planning but also in course design: what Ur refers to as a '*spiral syllabus*'.

Framework

Also, by looking at the PPU framework in terms of student activity in the classroom, an incredible freedom is restored. Teachers are free to vary their roles while setting up activities that allow students to proceed through the PPU stages in differing ways in each individual class.

We would argue that for students to learn in a way that is measurable to the teacher, they must in fact go through these stages in the classroom in some form. They must be able to:

- add to what they already know by having a language point focused on and presented
- explore the form, meaning and use of that new content in a controlled way in order to understand its limits and context
- use the new language point to communicate, so making it their own.

The teacher needs to be able to assess the degree to which they have mastered the language point so that they can plan future lessons. The framework can be cycled through in a variety of different ways, depending on the content, course goals and student needs. Without this PPU lens, learning may very well be taking place, but we cannot be sure exactly what it is, or it could very well be happening in *spite* of our best efforts. My students might not be learning anything, they may have learned the wrong thing or in the wrong way, or I may have thought they learned something that they in fact already knew.

Student learning

When PPU is seen in terms of student learning, it becomes a lens by which teachers can plan or analyse lessons. We have found it an invaluable tool in helping us fill the gaps in our own lessons and in guiding trainees toward achieving their objectives. Likewise, we have found that we have been able to look at student coursebooks in a new light, identifying the activities in terms of PPU. This process helps us supplement and modify the activities in coursebooks so that they help us achieve the learning objectives. In writing this article, our aim was to present an alternative way in which to use the PPU framework. It is a way of looking at learning so as to give teachers more options in lesson planning. We invite you to try to practise working with the PPU model by analysing lesson plans and coursebook activities. Ultimately its value will be tested if and when using the model helps you plan lessons which help your students learn. We hope it proves as valuable to you as it has to us. 



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