PRESENTATION-PRACTICE-PRODUCTION
AND TASK-BASED LEARNING IN THE LIGHT
OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES

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Abstract

In this article, some features of Presentation – Practice – Production (PPP) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) models for language teaching are discussed with reference to language learning theories. The pre-selection of target structures, use of controlled repetition and explicit grammar instruction in a PPP lesson are given, before considering exposure to language and productive output in the TBL lesson. While questioning some of the assumptions about language learning implicit in the PPP lesson, and suggesting that TBL approaches afford greater learning opportunities, my principal point is that acquaintance with language learning theories can usefully inform classroom experience, choice of activities and methodologies.

Introduction

Within the field of English language teaching there is an ongoing debate about the relative merits of two methods of teaching, the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model and task-based learning (TBL). PPP has been incorporated into mainstream coursebooks, occupies an enduring place on training courses, and continues to be defended by some respected writers and teachers. It is, however, considered by others to be ineffective and lacking a strong theoretical basis. Skehan (1998: 94), for example, criticises the durability of PPP in a conservative profession which is out of touch with language acquisition studies and is responsible for lazily transmitting traditional models of language teaching. He contrasts theoretical support for TBL with the largely institutional reasons for the continuing appeal of PPP, while other advocates of TBL (e.g. Willis, 1996) argue that a task-based approach is consistent with what we know about how second languages are learned.

What are teachers, perhaps trained in PPP and using course material steeped in PPP, yet keen to stay abreast of current changes in thinking, to make of this? One response would be to stick with the familiar methodology, to resist change not because such change is unnecessary but because it is disruptive. An equally unsatisfactory alternative would be to follow the new pedagogical fashion unquestioningly. Indeed, there are teachers who have voiced concerns about such an
uncritical acceptance of TBL (e.g. Bruton, 2002). A third way, the way followed here, is to reflect on the procedures employed in each approach and to evaluate the assumptions about language learning implicit in them. In this article I will consider some aspects of PPP and TBL with reference to current models of how languages are learned. Firstly I will describe and discuss features of what in my experience is a typical PPP lesson, before turning my attention to a TBL lesson. My purpose is not to identify a best method. It does not seem plausible that there could be one best method for all learners in every circumstance. Instead I will look at classroom practice in the light of language learning theories in order to explore the rationale behind our practice.

In appealing to language learning theories we are at once faced with the problem that there is no one accepted model of how second languages are learned. Indeed, as Mitchell and Myles (1998: 191) note, rather than reduction and consolidation, the area of second language acquisition (SLA) research is characterized by a proliferation of theories, with new theories being introduced while older ones are retained. While this is evidence of a certain degree of vitality in the field, it undoubtedly contributes to the skepticism with which some members of the teaching profession view SLA research. We are certainly not in a position where SLA theories can be the primary influence on classroom practice, and it seems neither likely nor desirable that teachers should ever become technicians implementing formulas designed by applied linguists. Nonetheless, the view expressed here is that language learning theories and research into SLA, increasingly designed to answer pedagogical problems, can be helpful in testing our intuitions and informing our experience from the classroom.

**Presentation-Practice-Production**

- **A Presentation-Practice-Production Lesson**

In a PPP lesson, the first stage is typically focussed on a single pre-selected grammar point, the aim being that the underlying rule is understood. At the practice stage the learner is expected to put the rule into operation, with the focus still on accuracy. The final stage allows the learner greater freedom to express meanings more spontaneously. These points can be illustrated by considering a PPP lesson aimed at using the past simple and past continuous tenses with a class of pre-intermediate learners.
A PPP Lesson

Step 1
The teacher provides a context for the grammar by introducing two characters (shown in pictures stuck on the board). One has bandages on his head and legs. The other wants to know what happened to him.

Step 2
The teacher elicits (where possible) a short prepared dialogue between the characters using prompts stuck to the board. The dialogue – an account of a road accident – includes examples of the past continuous being used with the past simple to express an interrupted action. Each line is modeled, and repeated by the class in chorus. The teacher then splits the class into two halves, with each half repeating the lines for one character. Finally students produce the same dialogue in pairs. One pair is called to the front of the class to present the dialogue.

Step 3
A written record of the dialogue is produced, highlighting the rules for making the past continuous tense, including questions and negatives. The explanation is given that the past continuous expresses an ongoing action in the past and the past simple an event interrupting that action.

Step 4
Students complete exercises in which sentences, each with two gaps, are completed using verbs given. Each sentence is completed with one verb in the past continuous and the other in the past simple. Students compare answers before class feedback.

Step 5
Students individually prepare stories of accidents they have been involved in. After 2-3 minutes preparation, they form groups of three and recount their stories. After 5 minutes the students form new groupings and tell their stories to their new partners. During feedback, one student tells the story of her accident to the whole class.

Characteristic Features of PPP

Pre-selection of a ‘structure of the day’

In the PPP lesson, there is pre-selection of a target language feature. The assumption is that language is learned in steps with the teacher or course material. We can imagine that course objectives might read something like *The students will learn how to use the past continuous and past simple tenses to express an interrupted action*. There is evidence however that factors internal to learners play a greater role in directing learning than the objectives the instructor sets for the lesson. Early
evidence for these internal factors came from observations that learners from
diverse L1 backgrounds tended to acquire particular grammatical morphemes in
sequence. In this so-called natural order the progressive –ing, for example, is
acquired earlier than the third person singular –s. This order of acquisition was
found to be similar (but not identical) to the order of acquisition in L1 learners and
was apparently independent of the age of the learner and whether or not learning
took place through instruction or in naturalistic settings (see Mitchell and Myles,
1998: 31-38). The morpheme studies are not without their critics, who have criticised
their validity. However, the basic point that morpheme studies provide support for
the concept of acquisition sequences in SLA is still widely held (e.g. Larsen-Freeman

Further evidence for acquisitional sequences comes from studies of features of
syntax such as word order rules, formation of negatives and relative clauses (see
Ellis, 1994: 99-105). Research into acquisition of negatives in English, for example,
suggests that learners pass through stages, firstly forming negatives by external
negation (attaching no or not to the front of declarative utterances), then inserting
the negative particle into the utterance (Martha not playing now) before acquiring a
negative attachment to modal verbs (I can’t play that one). At the final stage the
learners can implement the target rule, attaching negatives to auxiliary verbs (She
didn’t come today). The strong indication that some syntactic structures are acquired
in a predictable order, surely one of the most important findings from SLA research,
is made even more interesting by the suggestion that the sequence is resistant to
instruction. In other words, instructed learners tend to follow the same order of
acquisition as naturalistic learners who lack formal instruction (Ellis, 1994: 627-
636), although they may progress through the sequence more rapidly.

These fascinating investigations into acquisition sequences have been developed
into the multidimensional model for second language acquisition (Pienemann, 1989).
In this model, progression through processing stages is associated with an
increasing ability to manipulate and move elements within the structures. It is
necessary for learners to have grasped earlier stages in order to proceed to higher
stages. In contrast to these so-called developmental features, there are also
variational features that are not subject to these processing demands and can be
acquired at any time (the copula be is given as one example). From this a learnability
/ teachability hypothesis has been put forward (see Mitchell and Myles, 1998: 77-
79) in which the point that learners cannot acquire a complex structure in one step,
but have to proceed through a developmental route, leads to the suggestion that it
will be possible to assess the current level of development of learners and thus
predict what they should learn next.
At present, the learnability / teachability hypothesis is a promising development rather than an accepted model. It is however limited in scope to a small number of structures and there are some methodological problems in the research (it is difficult for the researcher to distinguish between utterances that are formulaic and those generated from internalization of word order rules, for example). Furthermore, it is likely to prove impractical to use the model to predict what learners are ready to acquire. Nonetheless, the empirical evidence and theoretical support outlined above suggests a learner internal syllabus, in which learners acquire features of language when they are ready, not when the course syllabus dictates.

For the teacher who aims to have learners acquire the past simple and past continuous the existence of an internal syllabus implies that unless instruction coincides with the internal readiness of the learner, it is not reasonable to expect learners to produce target language in ‘free’ communication. Furthermore, as learning may be a multi-step process (as illustrated by the acquisition of negatives discussed above), the teacher cannot expect learners to move from zero to targetlike production in one lesson, while the fact that progress through the stages can involve non-targetlike production suggests that errors should be viewed as inevitable. This last point should surely cause us to question the focus on accuracy that characterizes the first stages of PPP lessons.

**Controlled repetition**

The teacher in the model PPP lesson described made use of controlled repetition, having students repeat a dialogue as a class, between two halves of a class and between pairs. This kind of practice follows behaviorist models of language learning, in which acquisition takes place through habit formation. Now, it may be that some aspects of language learning are achievable through behaviorist techniques. Willis, (1996) for example (no supporter of PPP methodology), admits that fixed phrases, and features of phonology and pronunciation may be among these. Furthermore, repetition from the class in chorus, then with students speaking in groups and then in pairs may be a non-threatening starting point for those who are not confident in oral production. Conducted well, it may also have beneficial affective consequences, creating a good class atmosphere. However, if we believe that such repetition helps learners acquire an understanding of grammar, then surely we are mistaken. Early criticisms of the behaviorist model of language learning included the observation that children learning their L1 do not do so solely by imitation, but apparently forming and testing hypotheses on the structure of language. Commonly observed non-targetlike forms such as *mans and *goed are produced by children not through imitation but by overgeneralization of rules on the formation of plurals and past tense. L2 learners have been found to do the same, often displaying U-shaped behavior, first producing targetlike forms (perhaps by imitation), before going on to
produce non-targetlike forms prior to the reappearance of the target form. The observation that learners produce forms that are not part of the L2 contributed to the development of interlanguage theory (see Ellis: 1994: 350-355), where the term interlanguage is defined as the developing and evolving system of L2 knowledge held by the learner. Integral to this is the recognition that language acquisition is more creative and dynamic than simple imprinting of target language utterances.

It is not to be concluded from this that the teacher should never conduct drills. My point is rather that we should be clear about our aims. Is our aim simply to liven up the class? Quick drills may do this. Do we hope to help learners remember some fixed phrases or formulaic language? Again, repetition may be successful. Or do we use dialogue repetition because the activity is easier to set up and manage than (say) a communicative task? If this is the case then it would be wise to acknowledge that there is compelling evidence that important areas of language do not develop through simple repetition.

Grammar instruction

The final feature of the PPP lesson I will consider is the explicit, direct teaching of grammar, with the learners being presented with grammar rules before going on to practice the structures. The teacher instructs with the belief that such explicit instruction of grammar is beneficial, a belief that merits consideration.

Many studies have investigated the effect of instruction on the production of specific grammatical features. However, from the research on the effects of instruction reviewed by Ellis (1994: 617-627), one can find support for virtually any position. He cites research suggesting that presentation and practice of grammar is beneficial, while other studies suggest it is irrelevant, or positively harmful. Some studies conclude that focus on form is helpful for some grammatical features but not others; that it is effective for planned but not unplanned production, or that it is effective for both, but that no instruction would probably have worked almost as well. The picture is clearly a complex one. Supporters of formal instruction can, however, find encouragement in studies that indicate beneficial effects of form-focused instruction on accuracy if the structure being taught does not require complex processing and the instruction is extensive. The failure of form-focused instruction is traced, in some cases at least, to the learner’s stage of development and readiness for the structures isolated. Ellis (1997) illustrates this with an account of his own research in which learners were given three hours of instruction on wh- questions, followed by unplanned production in a communication game. He found that there was no overall significant improvement in accuracy following instruction, although some learners did improve markedly. In suggesting that this failure may have been due to the fact that the structure was beyond the stage of development the learners had
reached, we are faced with the constraints explained by the learnability/teachability model described above. Many teachers will recognize their own experience in Ellis’s description of his experiment—rules carefully explained and apparently understood, but not put into operation in spontaneous discourse. There is, as all teachers have found out, a difference between learners knowing a rule and being able to put it to use in unplanned interaction.

Norris and Ortega (2000) have conducted a meta-analysis of research on the effectiveness of classroom instruction, concluding that instruction incorporating explicit attention to language form is beneficial for learners. While all of the above does not amount to a resounding endorsement of grammar instruction, the conclusion we can draw is that explanation and practice of specific features of language is likely, under some circumstances, to be of benefit.

It should be clear from this discussion of features of PPP that some of the assumptions operating are questionable. One of the most flawed assumption is that teachers can pre-select what will be learnt. We have seen that there appear to be internal constraints on the order in which some features of language will be there have been suggestions that this learning is likely to take a more circuitous route than is implied by the PPP approach. Considerations such as these have led some to conclude that language teaching is in need of another model with a stronger theoretical footing. This new model, it has been suggested (Skehan, 1996), is provided by task-based approaches.

**Task-Based Learning**

- **A Task-Based Learning Lesson**

Central to task-based learning is the concept of *task*, defined as a meaning-focused rather than language-focused activity. Tasks could include reproducing a picture from a partner’s description, conducting a survey, comparing experiences or solving a problem, the essential feature being that learners are primarily attempting to accomplish the task using whatever language resources are at their disposal rather than practicing particular features of language. Coupled with the *communicative task*, in the framework for TBL described by Willis (1996: 53), is a *learning task* in which the emphasis is on reflection on the process of communication. This can be illustrated by considering what might happen in a task-based lesson. In this lesson, the language focus is the same as that for the PPP lesson previously described.
A TBL Lesson

Step 1
The teacher asks the students what words they associate with “policeman”, the second answer given being corruption. Asked what forms of corruption they can think of, the students quickly suggest taking money for minor offences. The teacher writes up the students’ suggestions concerning why policemen might take money (including passing a red light, not wearing a motorcycle helmet and not having a driving license). The suggestions are then cleaned from the board and the students challenged to work in pairs to recall them, classifying them in whatever ways they feel makes sense. After a few minutes of this the phrases are rewritten on the board.

Step 2
The teacher plays a tape of two fluent speakers talking about their experiences of being victims of extortion. During this the learners’ task is to listen for which of the situations on the board were part of the fluent speakers’ experiences. Students compare ideas prior to class feedback.

Step 3
Learners are given 3 minutes to prepare their own stories of paying bribes to avoid fines. After preparation their task is to find people who have similar experiences by interacting with other learners in the class.
Feedback involves learners reporting points their stories had in common.

Step 4
The learners, in groups of three, select one of their stories and prepare it for public presentation in front of class. They are given 10 minutes preparation time, during which the teacher moves through the groups helping out with language where necessary.

Step 5
One member from each group retells their story in front of class. The other learners choose the saddest and funniest stories.

Step 6
Learners study the transcript of the fluent speakers recounting their stories and carry out two language analysis tasks. The first one involves looking for, and classifying, words to do with cars. The second requires them to underline examples of was / were + _ing and to consider if the meaning would have been the same had the past simple been used. Following this second task, the learners are challenged to form a hypothesis about the use of the past continuous tense used in conjunction with the past simple.

Step 7
The final activity is a grammar interpretation one in which learners are shown pictures of a number of situations and asked to decide which one of two given sentences best describes each picture. An example is a picture of a policeman stopping a motorist, with the students choosing between the sentences “When I was coming to university a policeman stopped me / When I was coming to university a policeman was stopping me.”
- Characteristic Features of TBL

**Exposure to language**

In the TBL lesson above, the language that learners are exposed to is likely to be richer than in the PPP lesson including, as it does, examples of spontaneous production. The idea of maximizing comprehensible input is most closely associated with Krashen (1985), who proposed that second languages are learnt through understanding input that contains structures at the 'next stage' on the natural order of acquisition. While it is questionable to claim that comprehension is *sufficient* for language acquisition, the proposal that it is *necessary* seems intuitively appealing.

When considering L2 knowledge, it is useful to distinguish between explicit and implicit knowledge (Ellis, 1997: 110-115). The former consists of items and rules that exist in analyzed form, whereas the latter is intuitive, with learners not being able to state what they know. While Krashen's claim that explicit (learned, in his terminology) knowledge cannot become available for spontaneous use is highly controversial (and not widely accepted), his emphasis on the importance of implicit knowledge is surely a valuable insight. It does not seem likely that the great number of grammar rules (not to mention lexical items and discourse features) in English could be taught or learned as explicit knowledge, a consideration that suggests that implicit learning is primary (Ellis: 1997: 113). The TBL lesson, with its richer input and opportunities for analysis of texts, allows learners to notice what they want, need, or are ready to learn – features of discourse and lexis as well as aspects of grammar. Teachers have long been aware that learners frequently learn points other than those targeted. Such incidental learning is to be encouraged, but in order for it to occur learners must be provided with sufficiently rich language input.

To say that input is necessary for language acquisition to take place does not mean that it is sufficient nor, indeed, that a diet of input alone is the most efficient way to promote learning. In defending the position that comprehensible input is sufficient for interlanguage change, Krashen cited the success of language programs that provide a great deal of comprehensible input, such as the French immersion programs in Canada (Krashen, 1985: 16, 17). However, re-evaluation of the evidence from the immersion programmes (see Skehan, 1998: 12) indicates that while the comprehension abilities of the immersion-educated children approached that of native speakers, the same was not true of their production, with errors persisting in speaking and writing. Comprehension of input may result from effective use of comprehension strategies operating without attention to syntactic detail, leaving the interlanguage system unaltered. The pedagogical challenge then is to increase the chances of input (the language learners are exposed to) becoming intake (noticed and taken into temporary memory). In the task-based lesson used for illustration, this is facilitated in several ways:
The learners, after they have processed a text for meaning, study the transcript. This frees them from the limits of processing capacity, giving them time to notice features of the language. Importantly, the text is of fluent speakers engaged in a task similar to the one the learners have done. Learners may therefore be motivated to notice features that represent gaps in their abilities.

- Particular aspects of language are brought to focal attention by the teacher. In this case the attention of learners is brought to the use of the past continuous tense.

- The learners are expected to form hypotheses about the use of this feature of language. In the lesson outlined, learners are asked to work together to form hypotheses on the use of the past continuous with the past simple.

- In the language analysis stage an interpretation activity is used in which learners come to an understanding of a grammatical form without the burden of production, an alternative to output-oriented practice.

It could be argued that focusing on particular structures is similar to the ‘structure of the day’ approach of PPP. However the crucial difference is that learners are not expected to go on to produce the structures creatively. The constraints of the internal readiness of learners discussed under the multidimensional model relate to production, not the process of obtaining intake from input and constructing internal grammars (Ellis, 1994: 388).

Output
Central to the TBL scheme is a communicative task in which learners use language to express their own meanings. The central position given to language use suggests that the teacher believes this will aid acquisition. While it is not counter-intuitive to propose that we learn to communicate through communicating, the claim does have to be examined.

For Krashen, output is a consequence of acquisition, not a contributor to the acquisition process. This was challenged in the output hypothesis (see Ellis, 1994: 282) in which it was pointed out that there is little compulsion to learn grammar as so much input is comprehensible without grammatical analysis. It is only when an attempt is made at production that learners have to form hypotheses and make grammatical choices. Among the ways that output contributes to acquisition is that it encourages ‘noticing the gap’. In other words, through attempting to communicate, learners become aware of the gap between what they can say and what they want to be able to say. This idea is incorporated into TBL in the analysis of transcripts of more fluent speakers carrying out tasks the learners themselves have attempted.
Communicative output does not need to be correct in terms of form to be successful. Indeed, when the focus is on meaning there may be little pressure to force accuracy. This is of great significance for classroom practice. It is possible that in implementing communicative tasks we are encouraging the development of fluency at the expense of accuracy, probably the most common criticism of the use of tasks. The challenge is to encourage balanced development, creating classroom conditions that allow development of fluency, but also enable a focus on accuracy and interlanguage development. In the TBL lesson planning time was allowed before tasks, and there was inclusion of a report stage. Both of these may result in attention being given to accuracy. The evidence that planning results in an increase in accuracy and complexity of output is compelling (see Foster, 1996), but while including planning time and reporting may be valuable in encouraging accuracy, the question remains as to how they are related to language acquisition. In other words, how does output produced with attention to accuracy result in interlanguage development? We have already pointed out that noticing gaps is one way learners confront weaknesses in their performance. Another way output may contribute to language development is through hypothesis testing (Ellis, 1997: 129). Learners, given time to plan, may produce language at the ‘cutting edge’ of their ability, and use the feedback they receive to modify their interlanguage. Long envisages that ‘planned tasks “stretch” interlanguages further and promote destabilization’ (see Ellis, 1994: 596). This is less likely to happen with unplanned output, as the demands of the task may result in learners attending to meaning at the expense of form.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to relate classroom practice to studies of second language acquisition. In doing this I have tried not to follow a ‘top-down’ approach in which SLA theory guides language pedagogy, but rather have explored some areas of classroom practice that are reinforced or challenged by research into language acquisition. It was not my aim to draw conclusions about which method – PPP or TBL – is superior (although it should be apparent that I regard PPP as containing some questionable assumptions about the process of language learning, and view the TBL lesson as offering significantly greater learning opportunities). Indeed, even the keenest supporters of TBL acknowledge that, as regards evidence for the overall enhanced effectiveness of TBL, ‘the jury is still out’ (Skehan, 2002). What I hope I have shown, however, is that an acquaintance with language learning theories can aid the teacher in understanding classroom experiences, can help in setting realistic limits for our expectations and can inform our methodological choices.
References


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