

# Ways of Approaching Grammar Teaching

By Luz María Muñoz de Cote, Universidad de Guanajuato

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## Introduction

The Presentation-Practice-Production model to introduce new grammatical structures could be said to be an influential approach to the teaching of grammar which has provoked debate in terms of its effectiveness (Cullen 2001) for the past two decades. In this paper I will try to explain the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model basing my arguments on relevant information regarding the rationale behind the model, and by providing examples from a textbook (Richards, Hull and Proctor 1998). In the second part of the paper, I will evaluate the model, outline its strengths in terms of clarity and predictability for teachers and learners; and its weaknesses, such as the lack of consciousness-raising opportunities as well as its linear approach to learning grammar and the dangers of *fossilization*. I will support my arguments with activities from the textbook and from relevant literature. In the third part, I will propose changes to implement a Task-based learning approach to the aforementioned activities to help learners raise their consciousness and notice grammar and probably prevent fossilization. I will conclude by saying that an informed and well thought out choice of activities or tasks following different approaches to grammar teaching may be the better option in order to cater to different kinds of teachers and learners.

## Description of the Presentation-Practice-Production Model

The Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approach to grammar teaching involves three stages in a given order to fulfill the assumption that language is learned as a skill (Anderson in Mitchell et al. 1998; Johnson 1994). The implication of these assumptions is that language can be acquired through practice until it becomes automatic. Thus, the first stage focuses consciously on accuracy, the second stage practices language using accuracy activities to help proceduralization (also referred to as automatization), and the third stage focuses on fluency to help automatization.

The presentation stage presents new language in context through a short written conversation, a written text or a short story told by the teacher (Harmer 1991) (see Appendix 1). Language is introduced inductively (Thornbury 1999), exposing learners to form and meaning from which learners could infer the rule. The second step of this stage focuses consciously on accuracy as a source of declarative knowledge (Johnson 1994) using a deductive approach or overt explanation of the target structure (Hedge 2000). The objective is to provide learners with a clear framework to work towards proceduralization, as explained by Johnson

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1 This article is refereed.

2 The author can be reached at luzmaria@quijote.ugto.mx .

3 In this paper, the terms acquisition and learning will be used indistinctly.

(1994). In general, at this stage the learner is expected to demonstrate understanding of the form and the teacher is in full control (Harmer 1991). In most cases, the context also provides learners with unanalyzed language (formulaic chunks) that learners are encouraged to use during the production stage.

The second stage is practice. Its objective is to help learners start the process of automatization, which is fundamental for skill development (Johnson 1994; Anderson in Mitchell et al. 1998). At this stage learners practice language through teacher-controlled activities paying conscious attention to form. Anderson (in Mitchell et al. 1998) explains that this stage provides learners with opportunities to work out a method to perform accurately. If students fail, the teacher considers going back to the first stage. Activities for the practice stage can be done in pairs, individually or, as a whole class; the teacher acts as monitor while learners practice (see Appendix 2).

To achieve automatization, learners proceduralise their declarative knowledge in the production stage where they have the opportunity to personalize and produce language more freely (Hedge 2000; Harmer 1991). During this stage, it is hoped that learners do not pay conscious attention to form, but focus fully on the message. According to Johnson (1994) and Thornbury (1999) activities for the production stage should have a communicative purpose in order for the skill to become more rapid and automatic (Anderson in Mitchell et al. 1998) giving learners more control over their linguistic choices (Hedge 2000). Even though at this point of the lesson the main objective is to develop fluency, learners are expected to produce accurate language. If mistakes arise, the teacher assesses the need to go back to either the second or the first stage of the framework. Appendix 3 is an example of an activity that requires accurate answers. If learners have achieved the necessary linguistic comprehension to enable them to answer while listening to the tape, then the teacher may proceed to a freer activity.

### **Evaluation of the PPP model**

I will start the discussion by considering aspects like clarity and predictability of the model. As mentioned by Batstone (1994) and from personal experience as a teacher and coordinator of an EFL program, PPP provides inexperienced teachers with a sense of structure that helps them build their confidence as teachers. In addition to the teacher's confidence, there is also evidence from research (and from personal experience) that beginning learners may also benefit from the clarity and predictability of this framework as they also feel insecure using the language and need to gain confidence to succeed in their learning process (Batstone 1994). Furthermore, even though PPP is a vehicle for teaching grammatical structures through analysis, most of the time this model provides some formulaic language that motivates beginning learners when they find themselves using speech at an early stage. In fact, I can recall many students expressing their amazement when they find themselves communicating with peers in English at an early stage using

their limited linguistic knowledge. These chunks of speech can be memorized as unanalyzed wholes and are likely to occur while learners are engaged in conversational activities during the production stage (Ellis 1986) (Examples of formulaic language are found in Appendices 1 and 3). Yet, a drawback to teachers' and learners' confidence is that very frequently teachers' expectations are far from the reality of learners' learning (Hedge 2000). The latter comment is in agreement with Skehan (1996) who states that level of attainment in many classrooms using a PPP approach is rather poor.

It could be said that presenting language in context (see Appendix 1) which Skehan (1994) calls '*form-meaning pairing*', provides learners with pragmatic and sociolinguistic information which would enable them to process this knowledge and develop competence in these areas (Ellis 1994; Tarone & Yule 1989; Kasper 1997). This aspect could be considered a strength of the model as it would help learners produce grammatically correct language that is also appropriate when used in real life contexts (an example could be the use of formal and informal language). However, material designed to implement a PPP approach has been criticized (Scrivener, 1996) for its simulated authenticity and sometimes it does not provide reliable pragmatic information.

An important issue that has been questioned by many researchers (Skehan 1996; Scrivener 1996; Thornbury 1999) is the presentation of one structure at a time. A PPP approach assumes that language is learned linearly (Willis 1996b) while research (Nunan 1998; Willis 1996b; Rutherford 1987; Leech 1994) shows evidence that language is learned '*organically*', several grammatical items at a time. Learners form hypotheses when they first encounter a structure without fully understanding it, while, and at the same time, working out the meaning of other aspects of the language (Rutherford 1987; Skehan 1994; Batstone 1994; Long in Batstone 1994). While this happens, learners develop new hypotheses. Based on this evidence, expecting learners to proceduralize knowledge in a straightforward line through PPP, in my opinion, could be considered a narrow view of a complex process that has not taken into consideration learners' interlanguage development. In fact, it has been found that in order to develop interlanguage, learners need opportunities to notice and raise their linguistic awareness (Thornbury 2001; Cullen 2001). In fact, there is evidence, as Skehan (1994) and Hedge (2000) explain, that rarely do learners integrate new structures into their repertoire after the first two stages. Bialystok and Faerch et al. (cited in Stern 1992) explain that learners probably use explicit knowledge (consciously learned language) and implicit knowledge (automatic knowledge) interactively in order to develop automatization which could also explain why learners do not integrate new language so readily.

While engaged in fluency activities, most learners use the minimum possible language and the forms they feel confident with even if communication is based mainly on lexis (Batstone 1984). In my opinion, the relevance of using grammar is not made evident after the presentation and practice stages or it may be difficult to state that learners have been given the opportunity to notice form. To solve the lack of grammar use, some

authors (Batstone 1994; Thornbury 1999, 2001) state the need to give learners the opportunity to notice grammar. Both authors suggest providing learners with opportunities to formulate hypotheses and reformulate them as gaps are noticed (Thornbury 2000). Under these circumstances, and based on Tarone & Yule's definition, grammatical competence would be difficult to achieve through the PPP model because learners are not given opportunities to become consciously aware of the grammatical form. On the other hand, lack of opportunities to notice language and reformulate hypotheses may cause fossilization (Thornbury 1999; Batstone 1994).

### **Proposal**

In order to find solutions to the issues addressed in the evaluation of the PPP model, I propose to adapt the activities shown in Appendix 3 by implementing a task-based learning approach (TBL) (Willis 1996b). Willis states that TBL provides opportunities to move from language experience to language analysis. The objective is not only to reverse the process (first fluency and then accuracy) but also to give learners the opportunity to proceduralize through consciousness-raising activities. This provides learners with opportunities to develop their interlanguage and integrate new forms into their linguistic repertoire in order to prevent fossilization.

The TBL framework (Willis 1996a, 1996b) involves a pre-task, a task cycle and language focus. During the pre-task phase the teacher introduces the topic and provides input for learners. The task cycle provides learners with opportunities to use all the language they have integrated in their repertoire by working on a meaningful and purposeful task. The language focus stage gives learners the opportunity to analyze form and raise their consciousness by promoting noticing activities.

### **Proposed Activities**

The following activities were used with a group of beginners. Most learners are university students who have studied English for about 120 hours. They meet five times a week and have one-hour classes.

**Pre-task.** The teacher sets the context and activates learners' schemata. Working in pairs, students discuss the kinds of experiences people migrating to other places have. After the discussion, the teacher elicits the information discussed by the students and helps them categorize it. The categories could be 'positive' and 'negative'. Categorization helps learners better understand the information they gather and raise their awareness.

**Task cycle 1.** Learners are exposed to the language through a recording (Appendix 3). The second part of this stage gives the learner the opportunity to focus on form in order to be able to communicate as accurately as possible. Students listen to activity 4 (Appendix 3) finding as much information about the topic as possible. After listening, students compare their answers in small groups (2-3 students). Once they have listened twice to the recording and completed the chart, students prepare to report answers to the group. Each pair has to present their answers to the class in a minute only.

Language focus. At this stage, learners will focus on the use of the simple past tense. Working in small groups (3-4 people), learners discuss the information they have listened to in order to better understand the recording. After reporting their answers to the class, learners read the tapescript while listening to the recording to find things done before and after moving to the U.S. as well as positive and negative experiences in the U.S. Students work individually while the teacher helps with any questions that might come up by guiding them and encouraging them to reflect. The purpose is to guide the learners to find the rules that will enable them to form and use the simple past. To wrap up the activity, the teacher elicits examples from each category and writes them on the blackboard. If there are still problems, they are dealt with as a whole class. Even though the activity focuses on the simple past, the teacher will have the opportunity to help individuals with different learning abilities.

Task cycle 2. This second cycle gives learners the opportunity to personalize what they have learned. The purpose of this task is to find out the types of experiences that people living in Guanajuato face. The first step (working in groups of 2 or 3) is to choose a topic and design an interview. After that, each student has to interview someone and prepare a written report to be posted in the classroom.

Working in pairs or trios, students prepare a set of questions for the interview. They can choose one of the following topics: a) Being a young woman/man in Guanajuato; b) Living in a university town; c) Combining entertainment and school work during the semester; d) Studying away from home. After discussing and writing their questions, each learner interviews at least one person. After the interview, they go back to their groups and select the information that they will include in the written report. The teacher will be available for any help needed. While preparing the written report learners have the opportunity to use all the grammar they have integrated into their repertoire.

Language focus. Learners have the opportunity to analyze the language and focus on accuracy in order to produce a well-written composition to be displayed for others to read. Even though the main focus of this lesson is on the simple past tense, other grammatical structures may emerge. Learners will be encouraged to discover and discuss what they understand. According to Willis (1996b) this stage creates a real need to focus on accuracy. Students will organize the information they have. The teacher will be available to help as needed but only by giving learners the opportunity to reflect and work with the language to express their ideas clearly considering appropriateness and accuracy of language in general, rather than by producing a single form (Willis 1996b). Learners are encouraged to ask about any aspects of language they notice. Further practice focusing on form can be done while preparing the written report of the results.

## Conclusion

As I have tried to explain, there are positive aspects of the PPP model as well as issues that should be discussed further. Through TBL, some of the issues like awareness raising are dealt with, but other problems arise. An issue that is of concern, and involves both approaches, is the kind of interaction used by students during the task cycle and the production stage. Seedhouse (1999) mentions that there are tasks that can constrain the kind of turn taking used by learners making it repetitive and far from real life interactive patterns. Nonetheless, when I implemented the tasks suggested in the proposal, I noticed that students used limited patterns while they were interviewing each other; but, when they were discussing the information to include in the report, they were engaged in rather complex interactive patterns. Therefore, some of the communication strategies that students used during the first stage of the task remain a problem that needs a solution; yet, the discussion in groups provides further opportunities to use the language as each learner has different ideas and they seemed to use it differently.

On the other hand, as Skehan (1994) mentions, the task cycles provide a balanced combination of listening, speaking and language focus activities that could probably have an impact on interlanguage change. If so, it would help learners avoid fossilization of all the language they have integrated so far and not only of the language that the teacher would focus on if a PPP approach were used.

While using the proposed tasks in class, I found it difficult to go through the language focus stage. Almost all the learners had different problems and their different interlanguages were made evident. It took me a long time to give feedback to each pair (there were 11 pairs) and I think it was done somewhat inefficiently.

However, I should say that even though it caused me some anxiety, for most students it was a gratifying experience as they produced a rather well-written report for their level (most learners have been studying English for approximately 120 hours) (Appendix 4 shows sample reports). In fact, I believe that the tasks catered to the needs of analytical - as well as memory - oriented learners who would probably provide formulaic language, as mentioned by Skehan, "learners use the planning time to take risks and to incorporate more ambitious language in what they want to say" (1994:184).

Tarone & Yule (1989) point out that linguists cannot agree upon a single view of the learning process. Accordingly, experience has shown me that different approaches help solve some problems while others remain unsolved. For this reason, I suggest using an approach where PPP and TBL are used depending on learners' confidence or lack of it as well as teachers' confidence and experience. If the learning process starts by using a PPP framework, and gradually changes to a TBL setting, much can be achieved without upsetting learners' expectations which, as Willis (1996b) explains, can have a negative effect on the learning experience. It would involve "a philosophy of local solutions to

local problems" (Tarone & Yule 1989). However, I believe that adopting an alternative approach to teaching grammar involves more than altering and adapting material. It would be necessary to understand the rationale behind the approach to be used in order to build a sequence and provide learners with adequate tasks to develop their interlanguage.

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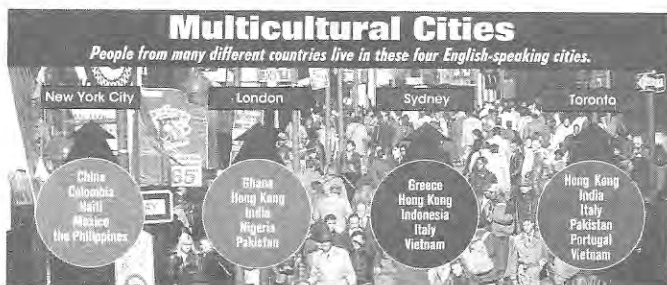
## Appendix 1

Example of a Presentation Stage activity.

# 1

## A time to remember

### 1 SNAPSHOT



Source: UN Department for International Economic, and Social Affairs.

**Talk about these questions.**

Why do you think these cities have so many immigrants?

Are there any immigrants in your city? Where are they from originally?

### 2 CONVERSATION

**A** Listen and practice.

Ted: Oh, I'm really sorry. Are you OK?  
 Ana: I'm fine. But I'm not very good at this.  
 Ted: Neither am I. Say, are you from South America?  
 Ana: Yes, I am, originally. I was born in Argentina.  
 Ted: Did you grow up there?  
 Ana: Yes, I did, but my family moved here eight years ago, when I was in high school.  
 Ted: And where did you learn to Rollerblade?  
 Ana: Here in the park. This is only my second time.  
 Ted: Well, it's my *first* time. Can you give me some lessons?  
 Ana: Sure. Just follow me.  
 Ted: By the way, my name is Ted.  
 Ana: And I'm Ana. Nice to meet you.



**B** Listen to the rest of the conversation.  
 What are two more things you learn about Ted?

### 3 GRAMMAR FOCUS

#### Past tense

Where <b>were</b> you born?	I <b>was</b> born in South America.
Were you born in Brazil?	No, I <b>wasn't</b> . I was born in Argentina.
Where <b>did</b> you grow up?	I <b>grew up</b> in Buenos Aires.
When <b>did</b> you move here?	I <b>moved</b> here eight years ago, when I was in high school.
Did you <b>learn</b> Spanish in high school?	No, I <b>didn't</b> . I <b>studied</b> it in college.
Did you go to college in California?	Yes, I <b>did</b> . I <b>went</b> to college in Los Angeles.

## Appendix 2

### Example of a controlled practice activity

**A** Complete these conversations. Then practice with a partner.

1. A: Could you tell me a little about yourself?  
Where ..... you born?  
B: I ..... born in South Korea.  
A: ..... you grow up there?  
B: No, I ..... I ..... up in Canada.
2. A: Where ..... you ..... to high school?  
B: I ..... to high school in Ecuador.
3. A: ..... you study English when you .....  
a child?  
B: Yes, I .....  
A: How old ..... you when you began to  
study English?  
B: I ..... eleven years old.



**B Pair work** Take turns asking the questions in part A. Give your own information when answering.

## Appendix 3

### Example of a fluency activity

#### 4 LISTENING

Listen to interviews with two immigrants to the United States. Complete the chart.

	Yu Hong	Ajay
1. Where is he/she from?	.....	.....
2. When did he/she move to the United States?	.....	.....
3. What does he/she do now?	.....	.....
4. What is difficult about being an immigrant?	.....	.....
5. What does he/she miss the most?	.....	.....

#### Tapescript

Listen to interviews with two immigrants to the United States. Complete the chart.

Yu Hong

Interviewer: Were you from originally, Yu Hong?

Yu Hong: I'm from China...from near Shanghai

Interviewer: And when did you move here?

Yu Hong: I came here after I graduated from college. That was in 1992.

Interviewer: And what do you do now?

Yu Hong: I'm a transportation engineer.

Interviewer: I see. So you're an immigrant to the United States.

Yu Hong: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: What are some of the difficulties of being an immigrant in the U.S.?

Yu Hong: Oh, that's not an easy question to answer. There are so many things, really. I guess one of the biggest difficulties is that I don't have any relatives here. I mean, I have a lot of friends, but that's not the same thing. In China, on holidays or the weekend, we visit relatives. It isn't the same here.

Interviewer: And what do you miss the most from home?

Yu Hong: Oh, that's easy: my mom's soup! She makes great soup. I really miss my mother's cooking.

#### Appendix 4

Examples of Learners' reports.

##### Sample 1

*Being a young man/woman in Gto.*

The majority of the people interviewed were born in Guanajuato. The average age of these people is 25 years old. All the people interviewed study in the University of Guanajuato. Many of these people spend their weekend dancing and practiced some sport. The interviewees have living in the city between one week and 12 years. Hte favorite places to dance of the youngs are Guanajuato Grill, El Capitolio and Bar. The 66 percent of the interviewed wake up at 6:30 a.m. and the rest of them do it between 7:00 and 8:00a.m.

##### Sample 2

The group interviewed three people. They said that most come here to Guanajuato , but one of them is from Apaseo el Grande, and she's here because she is studying. All the people interviewed don't like to do the homework but they like to visit places of the city for example the Jardin Union, La Presa and the Church.

The people that we interviewed like to go dancing. The average age of three people interviewed is twenty five years.

Theirs names are Perla, Imazul and Lourdes.