

From PPP to APC: Some Thoughts Triggered by Ellis' (2024) Take on Task-Supported Language Teaching

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Abstract

In this article I argue that the “Present-Practice-Produce” (PPP) approach to second language instruction is sometimes interpreted too rigidly and portrayed in a way that does insufficient justice to how the approach was originally described. I propose that each of the three Ps can be designed in diverse ways, with some more likely than others to bring about satisfactory learning outcomes. Misunderstandings about PPP could be avoided if we re-interpreted the sequence as “Awareness-Practice-Communication” (APC). I then demonstrate that, depending on how they are designed, PPP (or APC) lessons and task-supported language lessons can look very similar. Therefore, promoting a task-supported approach should not entail an outright dismissal of PPP.

Keywords

Awareness raising, transfer-appropriate practice, communicative tasks

1 Introduction

Although Ellis (2024) is not about a Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) approach to second language (L2) learning, Ellis does briefly clarify that he considers PPP to be different from a task-supported approach because lessons in the latter approach can proceed directly from the explicit presentation of certain language features (corresponding to the first P in PPP) to communicative tasks (corresponding to the third P in PPP), thus skipping the language-focused practice phase of a PPP lesson. In the present article, I argue that the degree to which a PPP and a task-supported lesson differ depends on precisely how they are designed.

PPP is usually portrayed as a “traditional” approach where students are first taught about a certain language pattern, are subsequently required to apply what they have been taught in mechanical drills and discrete-point exercises, after which they are expected to integrate the pattern in their “freer” use of the language. It is sometimes said that PPP already gained popularity in the 1960s, but according to Anderson (2017), the first publication which explicitly used the three terms “presentation”, “practice”, and “production” was a handbook for teaching oral English by Byrne (1976). The PPP acronym became established after the second edition of this book appeared (Byrne, 1986). Interestingly, there appear to

be very few other publications that provide detailed descriptions and elaborate demonstrations of PPP. Instead, PPP is discussed in sections of book chapters (e.g., [Larsen-Freeman, 2009](#)) as well as journal articles, where it is usually contrasted with an alternative approach such as task-based language teaching (e.g., [Phuong et al., 2015](#)).

PPP has been criticized on various grounds. One argument against the approach has been that PPP is incompatible with evidence that language acquisition is a non-linear, dynamic process. If language is not naturally acquired in a feature-by-feature fashion, then it seems naïve of PPP course designers to try and schedule the order in which students master such features. It is true that L2 textbooks that purportedly adopt a PPP approach are organized by numbered lessons or units, with each unit including certain language foci (such as thematically related vocabulary and specific grammar patterns). The order of the textbook units indeed gives the impression that certain facets of the target language are expected to be learned before others. Of course, writing a textbook or syllabus almost inevitably involves deciding on some sort of progression of lessons. This is not unique to courses that are said to use PPP. Besides, teachers who do not follow a textbook may examine their students' performance at the "production" stage of a lesson to plan the language foci of future lessons in a flexible manner. The point is that PPP is a design feature of a lesson rather than the reason why lessons are ordered in a certain way in a textbook. Another criticism of PPP has been that the approach fails to generate satisfactory learning outcomes, as there is said to be insufficient transfer of the explicitly learned and deliberately practiced language features when the students engage in actual communication. Whether learning outcomes from PPP are particularly poor relative to other instructional approaches is hard to tell in the absence of robust empirical evidence. PPP is also said to be a teacher-centered approach, whereas a learner-centered perspective is now advocated in many educational settings. Precisely how teacher-centered it is will of course also depend on how individual teachers implement the approach (e.g., [Bui & Newton, 2021](#)).

Despite decades of criticism, and despite the appeal of alternatives such as task-based and task-supported approaches, variants of PPP remain common in L2 courses around the world. There are several explanations why course designers and teachers may keep adhering to an instructional approach that is now often portrayed in the literature as outdated. One is that publishers avoid risks, and so new editions of textbooks resemble previous editions that proved commercially successful. Another is that a PPP lesson can give teachers a sense of confidence because they know in advance what language feature or pattern that they are to provide instruction about and because the exercises used at the "controlled" practice stage of a PPP lesson are usually easy to give immediate feedback on thanks to the tight language focus.

With regard to task-based language teaching (TBLT), an approach which is often proposed as an alternative to PPP, [Ellis \(2024\)](#) clarifies that this should not be treated as a monolithic approach as there are different versions of TBLT. In the present article, I argue that the same holds true for PPP. The approach is not as rigid as it is sometimes described. While the alliteration in present-practice-produce and the catchy P, P, P acronym rendered these labels memorable, there may be a downside to trying to capture the characteristics of an instructional approach by coining a catchy phrase. Each of the three terms may be read in particular ways. For example, "presentation" is often interpreted as the explicit presentation of a grammar rule, to be followed by a practice stage where the students apply it. It is thus interpreted as a deductive procedure (e.g., [Maftoon & Sarem, 2012](#)). However, "presentation" may just as well refer to providing samples of discourse to illustrate a certain pattern and then invite the students to figure out its function. Instead of using a deductive procedure, the first P can thus be applied in a way that prompts inductive learning or discovery learning. Such guided-inductive procedures in PPP were in fact demonstrated in books written decades ago ([Byrne, 1986](#); [Thornbury, 1999](#)). "Practice" in PPP is often described as mechanical drills and choral repetition, but this does no justice to the much wider range of practice activities that have been proposed for PPP. "Production" suggests an output activity, but this may still be mistaken for a language-focused exercise (e.g., produce sentences that exhibit a certain

grammar pattern) rather than genuine communication. It also leaves the impression that output is the only goal, while communication obviously necessitates comprehension skills as well.

In the sections that follow, I will propose an interpretation of each of the three Ps that is better compatible with other approaches to second language education. Before doing so, however, it is worth mentioning that the PPP sequence does have theoretical support. As argued by, among others, Johnson (1996), DeKeyser (1998; 2007), and Criado (2016), the intended progression in PPP lessons from explicit knowledge about a language feature to procedural knowledge (i.e., knowing how to apply it), and then possibly even to automatized knowledge (i.e., the ability to apply it effortlessly) is in accordance with *Skill Acquisition Theory* (J. R. Anderson, 1993). Ellis (2024) points out that creating explicit knowledge through an approach such as PPP makes the learning process different from how a language is acquired incidentally, because incidental acquisition fosters mostly implicit knowledge. Arguably, a learning trajectory that starts with explicit knowledge can “at best” lead to *automatized explicit* knowledge (Suzuki, 2017). Whether this different neurological representation of L2 as a result of explicit learning procedures should be considered a deficit is a matter of debate that harks back at least to Krashen’s (1983) call for a *Natural Approach*. It cannot be denied, however, that there are certainly individuals who started learning an additional language in settings that promoted explicit knowledge, and who developed a level of proficiency that is comparable—in behavioral terms—to that of L1 users, who rely almost exclusively on implicit knowledge.

When it comes to the criticism mentioned earlier that the learning outcomes from a PPP approach are unsatisfactory, it needs to be borne in mind that the effectiveness of *any* instructional approach depends on the quality of how it is applied. If a given lesson or language course fails to bring about good learning outcomes, this need not be owing to the underlying approach in general but possibly to the non-optimal way in which the approach was put into action—a point I will reiterate below.

2 From PPP to APC

2.1 From Presentation to raising Awareness

As I already mentioned previously, “presentation” should be interpreted as any means in which material is presented to students with a view to raising their awareness of a certain facet of the target language, such as a grammar pattern. Minimally, it could involve textual enhancement to draw learners’ attention to a language feature they might otherwise overlook (Lee & Huang, 2008; Sharwood-Smith, 1993). In the case of vocabulary, this could include the use of glosses (Boers, 2022). Students can also be prompted to discern grammar patterns or lexical items in samples of discourse and to hypothesize about their functions or meanings. Whether this guided inductive procedure is to be preferred over direct clarifications depends on numerous factors, but some studies have yielded positive evidence of its effectiveness (e.g., Cerezo et al., 2016). Guided inductive learning can also be steered through feedback on referential interpretation exercises of the kind used in Van Patten’s (1996) *Processing Instruction*. In the original version of this type of instruction, lessons did start with an explicit explanation of a form-meaning connection, but recent studies have demonstrated that this is not vital if learners themselves are able to figure out the form-meaning correspondence based on the feedback they receive on their responses during comprehension practice (e.g., Erlam & Ellis, 2019). All of these examples illustrate that the first P of PPP does not need to be a deductive procedure, and neither does it necessarily include meta-linguistic explanations.

When meta-linguistic explanations *are* deemed useful, then it is of course vital that they are comprehensible, unambiguous, and accurate. In my career as a language teacher and teacher trainer, it has often struck me how confusing meta-linguistic explanations in L2 textbooks and internet resources can be. Examples of such non-optimal explanations include cases of circularity (e.g., “countable nouns can be counted; uncountable nouns cannot be counted”), vagueness (e.g., “We use the present perfect to

talk about general experience”), terms that students find hard to make sense of (e.g., “indefinite past”), and potentially misleading statements (for example, learning that “We use the present perfect when an action or event in the past is still relevant now” could lead students to produce “Columbus has discovered America”). There is certainly a lot of room for improvement in the way meta-linguistic information is presented to students in some language courses, but this is not unique to courses that apply some sort of PPP sequence. However, the fact that there are preventable issues with the specific way that an approach is put into action does not mean that the approach should be rejected altogether.

2.2 More appropriate types of Practice

The second P is meant to prepare students for the smooth integration of certain language features when they use L2 for communication purposes. According to *Transfer-Appropriate Processing* theory (Lightbown, 2008; Morris et al., 1977), for practice to serve its purpose, it needs to resemble the activities for which the acquired knowledge or skills are intended. Because L2 learning is intended to enable people to communicate in their L2, we therefore need to consider what is involved in communication. Clearly, communication means comprehending, conveying, and exchanging “content” (information, beliefs, opinions, stories, emotions, jokes, etc.). To express and understand content, we typically retrieve form-meaning correspondences from memory. Another common feature of real-life communication is that it takes place in context, and it involves language use at the level of discourse rather than unrelated sentences.

Fortunately, few contemporary language courses include endless repetition and substitution drills. Many do feature decontextualized, sentence-level transformation exercises (e.g., “turn the following active sentences into the passive voice”) that require no engagement with the function or meaning of the manipulated language features (e.g., the communicative purpose the passive voice serves in a certain context). Other exercises that abound in contemporary materials require students to find errors in sentences or require students to distinguish between correct and incorrect candidate responses. After tackling such exercises, the students are expected to either forget the incorrect instances of language that they were invited to evaluate or to remember them with alarm bells attached (“remember *not* to say this; it’s wrong!”). Some L2 textbooks expose learners to more incorrect than correct instances in their language-focused sections (Boers, 2021, pp. 140-142). It needs to be added that the errors to which students are exposed this way need not be ones they themselves would make spontaneously. Perhaps these types of exercises are meant to prepare students for tests that use the same formats, but preparation for a language-focused test is not the same as fostering communicative competence. It is doubtful whether skills of detecting mistakes in made-up sentences (i.e., grammaticality judgement tests) and distinguishing between correct and incorrect candidate responses (i.e., multiple-choice tests) resemble the skills we orchestrate when we communicate. For example, when we express ourselves, we do not normally have a set of appropriate and inappropriate options *before us* to select from.

The closer the resemblance to genuine communication, the greater the likelihood that what is practiced will be transferable to genuine communication. If so, the most appropriate practice would be to engage in communicative activities—or “tasks” as understood in a task-based approach. However, teachers who adhere to a PPP approach may feel reluctant to throw students into the deep end of the communication pool without sufficient preparation. It is certainly true that communication in an additional language can be very challenging. One reason for this is that it requires substantial multi-tasking. Unless their L2 repertoire is already well developed and can be deployed nearly effortlessly, L2 users face the challenge of allocating considerable cognitive resources not only to content (what shall I say?) but also to language (how can I say this?). Focusing on content and on the linguistic packaging of that content must be especially demanding if the learners themselves need to generate the content. So, perhaps precedence should be given at the practice stage to activities that make use of content that is provided in one way or another to the students. This may be comprehensible textual, audio, or audio-

visual input, suitable for input-based output activities such as (but not limited to) story re-telling, text reconstruction (e.g., Dictogloss; Wajnryb, 1990), and roleplays. These are all discourse-level activities that require comprehension—you cannot re-tell a narrative unless you have understood the story line. As part of a PPP lesson, the input materials can be deliberately chosen so they illustrate the form-meaning connections that the students were previously made aware of. It is worth emphasizing that the story re-telling and roleplay activities mentioned here are *not* meant to be shallow read-aloud exercises, as this would reduce the need to comprehend the content and diminish the benefits of retrieving form-meaning connections from memory (e.g., Barcroft, 2015; Roediger & Butler, 2011). It is also worth pointing out that these activities can be organised so that students retell a story to peers who have not read or listened to the same story, perform role plays that vary from one group of students to the next, and so on. This renders the activities more “task-like”, because students communicate content to others who are not already familiar with the same content.

The content provided to students can also be non-verbal, as in the case of picture-based story-telling activities, picture-based spot-the-difference activities, and using a map to give directions to someone. Note that these activities bear a close resemblance to tasks as well if they require students to exchange information because there is an “information gap”. The reason why I group them under “practice” is that they are not likely to occur in authentic situations. For example, if someone asked you for directions and if you had a map, then you would surely show this map while giving directions. If friends were looking for differences between drawings, then they would surely look at them together instead of keeping them hidden from each other. I recognize that authenticity need not be an essential feature of tasks that are designed for the classroom. Regardless of whether they are called exercises or tasks, what matters is that the activities foster skills that will serve learners well when they do engage in authentic communication.

Because “practice” precedes “production” in a PPP lesson, the approach is sometimes said to prioritize accuracy. The focus on accuracy is indeed obvious in the exercises I previously expressed scepticism about, such as find-the-mistakes exercises and choose-the-correct-form exercises. Incidentally, I have not found examples of such exercises in the books that are regularly cited in connection with the practice stage in PPP-like lessons (e.g., Byrne, 1986; Ur, 1996). In any case, according to *Skill Acquisition Theory*, practice does serve the purpose of fluency development (Lyster & Sato, 2013; Suzuki, 2023). Unfortunately, some language courses that purportedly adopt a PPP approach use practice activities to prepare students for discrete-point tests, but which are not likely to contribute much to the learners’ communicative competence. If it does not prepare students for the third P of a PPP sequence in the first place, then teachers should not be surprised if their students’ performance at this “free production” stage falls short of expectations. With more appropriate practice activities (e.g., Gatbanton & Segalowitz, 2005), learning outcomes might well be different. As DeKeyser (2010) once put it in relation to language practice, “Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater.”

2.3 Communication

The third P should not be just about producing language, but about communication. Ideally, the activities designed for this stage are tasks, as understood in a task-based approach (Ellis, 2024). I am suggesting the term communication because, despite the numerous efforts by authors to clarify what is meant by “task”, there remain countless researchers and practitioners around the world who find it hard to distinguish tasks from exercises (Boers & Faez, 2023). In my view of PPP (or APC), this is the stage where students express their own “content” (opinions, beliefs, factual information, stories, and so on) and do so with a clear communicative purpose—solving a problem, reaching an agreement, contributing information to a collaborative project, entertaining an audience, and so on. This will often involve content that was provided to them as well, but the students are expected to communicate things beyond the given content (offering opinions, discussing alternatives, adding information, using the information to solve a problem, and so on).

The tasks can be chosen or designed in a way that the language pattern which was introduced (in one way or another) earlier in the sequence is felt by the students to be useful to reach the desired (non-linguistic) outcome, but designing such “focused” tasks will not always be feasible (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993). If it transpires that students make little use of what the previous stages of the lesson focused on, then this does not necessarily mean that no learning took place. It may instead mean that what was learned previously was not experienced by the students as essential to complete the specific task or that the chosen tasks required a degree of automatization that was not reached yet. Evidence that learning did take place may emerge when the students perform another communicative task later in the course.

3 APC and Task-Supported Language Teaching

In the above sections, I have re-interpreted the PPP sequence as an APC sequence (Awareness-Practice-Communication). Although I envisage the third stage to consist of “tasks”, APC is clearly distinct from a *task-based* approach, which nurtures mostly implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2024). However, APC need not be very different from a *task-supported* approach, where tasks also follow language instruction. What distinguishes PPP from a task-supported approach, according to Ellis (2024) is that the latter *can* skip the practice stage. If a task-supported lesson does not skip the practice stage, then it begins to look pretty much like a PPP lesson. To illustrate, let’s look at how a *task-supported* lesson was designed in a study by Li et al. (2016) and Ellis et al. (2018). The lesson they describe consists of the following sequence:

1. Explicit teaching of task-relevant vocabulary and explicit explanations about a grammar pattern (passive voice).
2. A sentence-level grammaticality-judgement exercise, where the students evaluate if the passive voice is used correctly and try to fix the errors.
3. A text-reconstruction activity: The students listen several times to stories (flooded with instances of the taught grammar pattern), then recreate the stories, and rehearse re-telling the stories in pairs.
4. A creative output activity, where the pairs of students invent endings for the stories and share these with their classmates. The whole class then votes on the best ending per story.

To me, this resembles a PPP/APC sequence: starting with awareness raising, followed by practice, and ending with a task. The grammaticality-judgement exercise is definitely “practice” (though not of the kind that I recommend). Some readers might consider the text-reconstruction activity to be a task, but this is debatable as it does not have a clear purpose other than reproducing a text. Re-telling the stories is not a real task either, because there is no information gap (all the students are by now familiar with the stories). The activity where students produce endings to the stories with a view to entertaining their classmates appears to be the only real task component of the lesson.

Depending on how two supposedly contrasting approaches are put into action, they can in practice become indistinguishable.

4 Conclusion

When PPP is mentioned in articles, authors often seem to assume that all readers share their understanding of PPP. They may cite one or two publications that are allegedly representative of PPP, but the procedures described in these cited works do not necessarily match how PPP is portrayed. Misunderstandings about PPP may have arisen because the early publications that illustrated the intended approach are no longer consulted, and authors instead rely on more recent and concise depictions of PPP, which may lack nuance. The three terms in “present-practice-produce” are rather ambiguous as well.

Choosing these three words to form an alliterative phrase and a catchy acronym may not have helped to avoid the misunderstandings.

I concede that APC hardly sounds as catchy as PPP. It is very doubtful whether my new acronym will ever replace the established one. I nonetheless hope that it can serve as a reminder that we are dealing with an approach that is far less rigid than how it is sometimes portrayed. A PPP lesson can be designed in diverse ways and with integration of useful insights from other paradigms. It must be possible to enhance the efficacy of PPP-like courses by giving proper thought to each of the three Ps.

Re-appraising an approach can be more useful than simply dismissing it.

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