WHY PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT SENSE: THE PAST, PRESENT AND POTENTIAL FUTURE OF THE PPP PARADIGM IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

Among the many lesson planning paradigms used in English language teacher education over the last 40 years, PPP has proven to be one of the most popular and most durable (see Figure 1) despite regular criticism in literature emanating from the Anglophone centre of ELT theory. After presenting a brief history of the paradigm and outlining the main criticisms directed at PPP, especially in the 1990s, I discuss some important research findings from SLA studies since the turn of the century that lend support to PPP-type lesson structures. I briefly analyse parallels between PPP and other teaching paradigms deriving from skill learning theory, linking these paradigms to the expectations of many learners worldwide, and the organisation of content in many mainstream ELT coursebooks. I identify three potential contexts for using PPP, including that of primary and secondary teachers working in low- and middle-income countries, and describe a PPP lesson structure from my own work as a teacher and teacher trainer compatible with best practice in mainstream teaching. While I caution that PPP cannot and should not be used to structure every lesson, I argue that it can be an appropriate and effective vehicle for the teaching of grammar, functional language and lexis, especially at lower levels of proficiency (up to B2), where the majority of ELT around the world happens, and is likely to happen for the foreseeable future (Graddol 2014).

PPP is a paradigm for structuring language lessons involving the introduction and practice of new language features (lexical, grammatical or functional) and not a methodology per se (Swan 2005). It stands for Presentation, Practice, Production, understood as follows in broad agreement with Byrne (1976, 1986) and Harmer (2007):

Presentation: Language features are selected and sequenced in advance for explicit instruction (i.e. Focus on Forms; Long 1991), involving contextualised presentation followed by clarification of meaning, form and use.

Figure 1. References to four planning paradigms in ELT Journal (1981-2015).
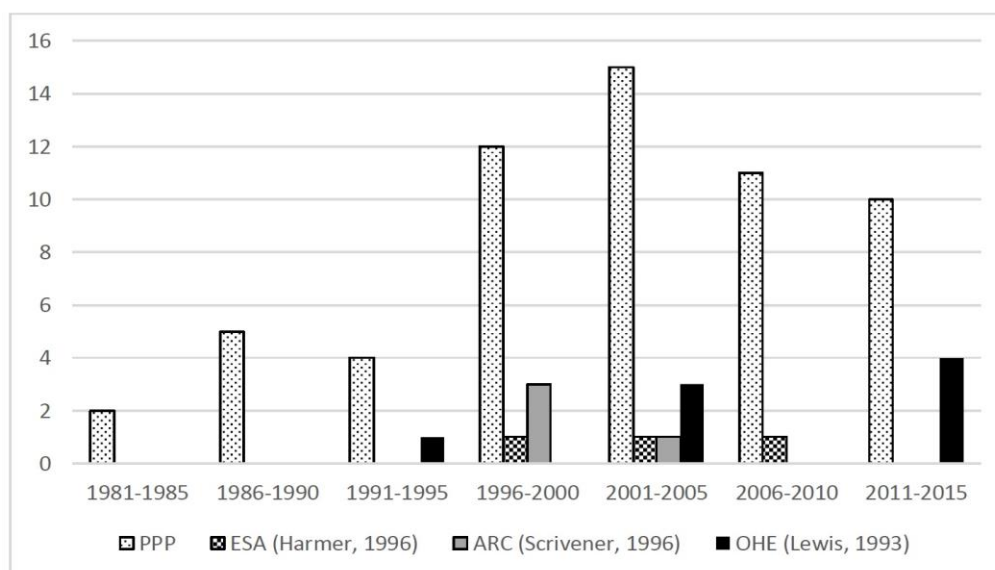
Note: Publisher's own online journal search engine was used (http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/search). Searches included possible abbreviated forms (e.g., "ESA", "E-S-A", etc.), non-abbreviated forms (e.g., "engage study activate"), and with author name but without quotations (e.g., Harmer engage study activate). Results were examined for reference to the paradigm. Pieces (e.g., articles, reviews, 'readers respond' pieces, etc.) which included multiple references were counted only once. Year of print publication was used.

Practice: Controlled practice of the feature is provided (e.g. in gap-fill exercises, 'closed' speaking practice activities and oral drills).

Production: Opportunities for use of the feature is provided through free production activities that attempt to simulate real-world usage (spoken or written) such as in role-plays, discussions and email exchanges.

A brief history of PPP

Contrary to the beliefs of a number of writers, PPP does not originate in either audiolingual (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2006; Harmer 2007) or 'behaviourist' (Lewis 1993: 6; see also Willis 1994; Scrivener 1996) approaches to language teaching; the freedom of the final production phase is clearly incompatible with audiolingual methods (Rivers 1964; Richards & Rogers 1986). It was during the transition period between situational language teaching (SLT) and communicative language teaching (CLT) in the UK that Donn Byrne coined the three stages; Presentation, Practice and Production in his first edition of *Teaching Oral English* (1976)[1]. While SLT had involved Presentation and Practice, the final phase was innovative, an important component of the newly emerging communicative approach also being experimented with by coursebook writers at that time, such as Abbs and Freebairn (e.g. 1975, 1977) in their *Strategies* series (Rixon & Smith 2012). Similar paradigms became common within the "'weak' version" of CLT (Howatt 1984: 279) over the next 10 years (see e.g. Finocchiaro & Brumfit 1983: 106; Harmer 1983: 55), although the acronym 'PPP' only became established after the second edition of *Teaching Oral English* (Byrne 1986).

During the 1990s PPP fell decidedly out of fashion. A number of authors criticised the PPP paradigm, commonly citing three related arguments as follows:

1. The synthetically-sequenced, isolated focus on form of PPP does not reflect how languages are learnt (e.g. Ellis 1993a; Lewis 1993; Willis 1994; Skehan 1998);

2. PPP focuses on teaching to the detriment of learning, making it incompatible with learner-centred approaches to education (e.g. Lewis 1996; Scrivener 1996);

3. It is prescriptive and inflexible, describing only one of many possible types of lesson (e.g. Scrivener 1996).

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[1] An exhaustive search of the ELT archive at Warwick University found no prior reference to the paradigm.

The first of these criticisms largely mirrored dominant interpretations of findings from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research at the time that, at best, only a weak interface existed between explicit and implicit language knowledge, justifying procedures such as noticing (Schmidt 1990), consciousness-raising (Ellis 1991) and Focus on Form (FonF) (Long 1991), but not explicit, Focus on Forms (FonFs) models such as PPP (Ellis 1993b; 1994: 659). The second criticism reflected a closely-related parallel shift away from teacher-led instruction towards more learner-oriented strategies, such as discovery learning (see Harmer 1995), possibly due to the non-interventionist influences of the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell 1983) and early realisations of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) (e.g. Prabhu 1987). Few researchers at that time were arguing for a strong interface between explicit and implicit knowledge in support of PPP-type instruction, DeKeyser (e.g. 1998) being the notable exception.

Since the 1990s, while criticism of PPP has continued (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2006; Masuhara et al. 2008; Kiely & Askham 2012), especially by proponents of TBLT (e.g. Ellis 2003, 2006; Willis & Willis 2009; Long 2015), it has also continued to remain popular as a paradigm for initial teacher training courses such as the Cambridge CELTA and the Trinity CertTESOL (Harris 2015), and has received support from teachers (e.g. Long & Kurzweil 2002), researchers (Sato 2010) and methodologists (e.g. Bruton 2002, 2005; Ur 2011; Arnold et al. 2015).

Recent evidence from research studies supporting PPP

While the evidence from research studies conducted between the 1970s and the 1990s cast significant doubt on the validity of more explicit, Focus on Forms-type instruction such as PPP, more recent evidence paints a significantly different picture. Two important meta-analyses conducted since then have indicated strongly that explicit instruction (which includes PPP) is more effective than implicit instruction (Norris & Ortega 2000; Spada & Tomita 2010), one of which has also indicated that Focus on Forms instruction (including PPP) is no less effective than Focus on Form instruction (Norris & Ortega 2000). In support of PPP-type instruction, Spada and Tomita (2010: 287) note that:

> …the positive effects of explicit instruction on measures of spontaneous L2 production could be interpreted as support for the strong interface position and the argument that declarative (i.e. explicit) knowledge obtained

via explicit instruction can be converted into procedural (i.e. implicit) knowledge with practice (Hulstijn 1995; DeKeyser 1998).

Similarly, Spada and Lightbown's (2008) review comparing studies into isolated form-focused instruction (i.e. FonFs, including PPP) and integrated form-focused instruction (FonF), found clear justifications for both depending on context. They identify, among other contexts, classes of learners who share an L1 as being likely to benefit from isolated form-focused instruction (when it is directed at the influence of L1 on L2). This includes the vast majority of English language classes around the world, which are conducted in primary and secondary classrooms. This body of evidence has caused Rod Ellis, previously critical of PPP (e.g. 2003: 29), writing with Shintani more recently (Ellis & Shintani 2014:112), to note:

> [T]he research . . . suggests that there is merit in teaching explicit knowledge of grammar as an end in itself and in supporting this with teaching some metalanguage. It casts doubt on the value of the second P (controlled practice) in the PPP sequence. The research also suggests that explicit instruction is much more likely to be effective if it is directed at grammatical features that learners have partially acquired, rather than at new features... Explicit grammar instruction has a place in language teaching but not based on a grammatical syllabus. Instead it should draw on a checklist of problematic structures and observational evidence of their partial acquisition. In the case of vocabulary, however, explicit instruction can usefully draw on predetermined lists of words.

Thus, while recognising the validity that the research findings are offering to aspects of PPP,

Ellis and Shintani question the validity of the Practice phase (discussed below) and the use of a pre-defined syllabus in the teaching of grammar (but not lexis), arguing instead for a 'checklist of problematic structures' something that, depending on definitions, could be considered a grammar syllabus of sorts. Importantly, irrespective of whether such a 'checklist' is a syllabus or not, it can be used in conjunction with a 'Focus on Forms' paradigm that teaches features of language discretely, such as PPP, as outlined below.

PPP and learner expectations

The underlying structure of PPP can be traced back to skill learning theory (Fitts 1964), and is also supported by research into skill learning in cognitive psychology (Anderson 1983) and paralleled by similar paradigms in other types of education (e.g. Hagger & McIntyre 2006; Petty 2014), and more popular models such as 'explain, demonstrate, imitate, practise' used in the British Army (see Table 1).

This similarity is no coincidence. It reflects how we learn to drive a car, to do long division, to play the guitar, and even to learn to read and write, all of which are procedural skills similar to, but less complex than, learning a new language (Anderson 1983). As such, PPP may or may not be an accurate representation of how languages are *learnt* on an individual level, but it reflects well how many of us expect to be *taught* a new skill on a social level (Widdowson 1990; Borg 1998; Burgess & Etherington 2002). It stands to reason that demonstrations or presentations should precede practice, and that slow, careful practice should precede more automated, fluent practice. For learners and teachers in parts of the world where educational culture tends towards higher levels of

Table 1. Selected paradigms from other areas of education reflecting skill learning theory.

Paradigm / model	1		2	3	4
Skill learning theory (Fitts 1964)	Cognitive stage		Associative stage	Autonomous stage	
PPP (Byrne 1976)	Presentation		Practice	Production	
ACT (Anderson 1983)	Declarative stage		Knowledge compilation	Procedural stage	
MPF (Hagger & McIntyre 2006)	Modelling		Practice		Feedback
PAR (Petty 2014)	Present		Apply		Review
'Explain, demonstrate, imitate, practise'	Explain	Demonstrate	Imitate	Practise	

teacher-led instruction, PPP is often culturally much closer to learner and teacher expectations than alternative lesson frameworks based on for example task-based learning (Bruton 2005; Sato 2010; Choi & Andon 2014). Schulz (1996: 349) notes, '…it might well be wise to explore the fit of learner and teacher beliefs and take into account learner opinions of what enhances the learning process', a point supported by Dörnyei (2005), Widdowson (1990) and Holliday (1994: 106) who also notes 'student reaction is rarely taken into consideration in the design of methodologies'.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the preferences of English language learners does not come from research, but from their influence on materials design. The multimillion pound ELT publishing industry is consumer driven. Its most widely published and most popular titles are shaped partly by sales, but also by extensive consumer research, both into the preferences of learners in the case of self-study material, and also the preferences of teachers and learners for classroom-based materials. And what sales and consumer opinions reveal has been remarkably consistent; PPP has dominated the organisation of the majority of mainstream ELT coursebooks ever since Abbs and Freebairn used it for their *Strategies* series in the 1970s (Tomlinson et al. 2001; Nitta & Gardner 2005; Tomlinson & Masuhara 2013).

Thus, while it should be noted that not all learners necessarily expect a language lesson to follow the typical stages involved in skill-learning, the fact that PPP does is likely to contribute significantly to its usefulness for those learners who do, and their teachers.

Appropriate contexts for PPP

As a teacher and a teacher trainer with extensive experience in both pre-service and in-service teacher education, I have found PPP useful as a structuring framework when appropriate to the learners, the learning conditions, and the chosen focus of the lesson, especially in the following three contexts:

Context 1: Initial intensive language teacher training courses

The first context relates to pre-service English-language teacher training, especially short courses such as the Cambridge CELTA and the Trinity CertTESOL. Research by Harris (2015) indicates that PPP continues to be popular also among other trainers on such courses. I suggest that this is because PPP has a number of advantages, especially important on more intensive (four weeks) courses:

1. It is a common sense, logical framework for skill training (as argued above).

2. It is familiar to the prior educational culture of many trainee teachers (including many from the UK, where such courses are popular), a significant influence in much initial teacher training (Lortie 1975; Wedell & Malderez 2013).

3. The prescriptive structure of PPP serves as a useful scaffolding artefact, especially beneficial for such trainee teachers often experiencing high levels of stress and steep learning curves.

Context 2: In-service teacher training in low income countries

The second context where I have found PPP useful is typical of low-income countries, where teaching conditions tend towards the following characteristics:

1. curricula are externally imposed and ambitious;

2. classes are large (over 30 learners);

3. learners share their L1 or other community language;

4. learners have only a few hours of instruction per week;

5. educational culture tends towards higher levels of teacher intervention.

This is largely in agreement with Ur (2011: 519), who notes:

> . . . teachers of school children in a state school in a country where the target language is not spoken outside the classroom are likely to get best results in grammar learning through systematic explanation plus practice . . .

These characteristics share much in common with what West (1960) originally called Teaching in Difficult Circumstances (TiDC) and describe well both the most demanding and the most common contexts for English language teaching around the world today including much of India, sub-Saharan Africa and China (Smith 2011). Working with both primary and secondary teachers in low- and middle-income countries, such as Eritrea, Rwanda, Bangladesh, Malawi, Algeria and Malaysia, I have often found teachers willing to adopt PPP-type paradigms in their own classrooms, likely due to similarities to generic lesson structuring models often used across different subjects in such countries. Likewise, Allison (1986) reports on an example of successful implementation of PPP in a Botswanan context.

Context 3: EFL and ESOL learners at lower levels of achievement

The third context relates largely to my own teaching in the adult EFL and ESOL sectors in the UK, where I make use of PPP with classes of learners that tend towards the following characteristics:

1. low levels of overall language proficiency;

2. low language learning aptitude;

3. low levels of literacy;

4. low levels of learner autonomy;

5. limited experience of formal classroom study;

6. specific educational needs.

As Muijs and Reynolds (2011: 50) note, referring to the role of direct explicit instruction in mainstream education, 'the highly structured approach seems to be particularly effective for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, or pupils starting from a low level of achievement in a particular subject'.

How I use PPP when teaching

Given how PPP is sometimes misrepresented, even in current literature (see Long 2015), I have chosen here to include a personal account of how I might use PPP to structure a lesson effectively, making reference to supporting evidence from both mainstream pedagogic and language teaching literature.

In contexts where I am required to follow an externally-imposed synthetic syllabus (e.g. a national curriculum), the dictates of such a syllabus are balanced as far as is practically possible with the developmental needs of the learners when selecting language features for presentation. This is especially true in the case of grammar, given the importance of ensuring that learners are ready to acquire features for the instruction to be effective (Larsen-Freeman 2003; Ellis 2008; Ellis & Shintani 2014). In contexts where such a syllabus is not imposed, choice of features is likely to depend partly on initial needs analysis and partly on continuing formative feedback from learners' specific challenges and developmental needs.

Lesson introduction

At the beginning of the lesson, as is considered good practice in mainstream K-12 education (Muijs & Reynolds 2011: 39–40; Hattie 2012: 46), I make the intended learning opportunities and lesson structure explicit, using English and mother tongue (when appropriate and if available),

presenting these as a 'menu' or 'map' if working with younger learners. This does not necessarily mean that we stick rigidly to this structure as the lesson progresses (see: Anderson 2015).

Presentation

The presentation phase may involve contextualisation and noticing of new language, although this is brief if lesson length is short (40-45 minutes is the norm in many K-12 contexts). Whole-class interactive teaching, evidenced to be effective in mainstream education (Petty, 2014), is used to elicit aspects of meaning, form and use, and to check understanding. Mother tongue is used if appropriate. Cognitive scaffolding strategies such as *think, pair, share* (McTighe & Lyman 1988) and more inductive, discovery learning are used when required to provide opportunities for both collaborative and individual theory construction. The presentation phase can potentially also involve noticing and consciousness-raising (see Gabrielatos 1994; Long & Kurzweil 2002), especially useful if the language introduced is likely to be completely new for the learners.

Practice

The practice phase serves a number of purposes. As well as consolidating understanding and providing carefully scaffolded practice opportunities, it also provides the teacher with an opportunity for informal formative assessment of learner understanding of what has been presented. Formative assessment has been demonstrated to yield substantial learning gains (Black & Wiliam 1998), and provides a strong justification for the middle 'P' often neglected in SLA-oriented discussions of PPP (e.g. Ellis & Shintani 2014, discussed above). This phase may include controlled writing activities or appropriate use of gap-fill type exercises. If administered as individual or pairwork tasks, such exercises enable me to conduct formative assessment and provide differentiated assistance when required, particularly important given the likelihood of learners' individual developmental needs varying, especially with regard to the acquisition of grammar. Peer-teaching is a useful additional bonus (Petty 2014) during this phase if pair or groupwork comparison precedes feedback to the task. Practice phases may also involve structural drills and semi-structured speaking activities to allow proceduralisation of grammatical and lexical patterns, the rehearsal of which in the working memory promotes longer term retention of such structures (Ellis 1996; Ellis & Sinclair 1996), and

can be made stimulating through the use of memory games, rhymes or songs, especially when teaching children. Such repetition is important in the learning of lexis (Nation 1990: 44; Ellis 1996), is validated by cognitive theory (Anderson 1983), and provides yet another justification for this middle 'P'.

Production
The production phase provides an opportunity for the all-important output that facilitates proceduralisation of structural and morphological features of the new language (Lightbown's 'practice' 2000: 443; Ellis 2008, Principles 7 and 8), and should whenever possible involve meaningful interaction rather than display usage (Larsen-Freeman 2003). The extent and type of production will depend on learners' prior knowledge of what is being taught. If this is the first time learners are encountering a grammatical structure, less demanding and more highly scaffolded tasks (such as collaborative writing) will be selected. If prior knowledge is expected, more procedurally demanding, freer activities will be chosen (such as role-plays). This phase will often involve collaborative learning such as pairwork or groupwork speaking practice, enabling me to provide correction, further differentiated instruction, and to conduct further formative assessment, this time of learner usage. My corrective feedback during spoken production usually involves 'segmented recasts'[2], a fast and salient correction strategy that permits feedback to a larger number of learners (Loewen & Philp 2006). Any recurring, shared errors are noted and prioritised either for whole-class clarification after the production phase has finished (time permitting), or to inform future planning cycles.

Lesson conclusion
Finally, at the end of such a lesson, I involve learners in reflecting on what was planned, what actually happened, and what we learnt as a result, possibly using mother tongue at lower levels of proficiency if available. Eliciting what has been learnt at the end of the lesson is standard good practice in mainstream education (Muijs & Reynolds 2011; Hattie 2012). By adding to this by raising learners' awareness of how unpredictable language learning can be, we can help learners to develop realistic expectations of their own progress (Oxford 1999).

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[2] In a 'segmented' or 'partial recast', the interlocutor recasts the problematic form only, rather than the whole phrase or sentence.

When used as indicated, PPP provides me with a useful planning paradigm, and my learners with a clear lesson structure that mirrors their expectations and likely attention levels well. Cognitively challenging input is provided towards the start of the lesson and opportunities for interaction and enjoyment come towards the end of the lesson, if and when all goes reasonably to plan. However, the framework does not necessarily prevent me from responding to unplanned learning opportunities as appropriate, or dealing with emergent language as it occurs during the lesson (see: Anderson 2015).

The procedure outlined above reveals strong links to established good practice in mainstream primary and secondary contexts (Brophy & Good 1986; Black & William 1998; Muijs & Reynolds 2011; Hattie 2012; Petty 2014), which is justified within a PPP framework, given that it aims to develop explicit, declarative knowledge, a learning outcome shared with much mainstream teaching. As Ellis (2008: 3) suggests, as one of three very different ways to approach the teaching of grammar:

> 'Focus the instruction on explicit rather than implicit knowledge, as explicit knowledge is not subject to the same developmental constraints as implicit knowledge. That is, learners can learn facts about the grammar of a language in any order, but they will follow a definite sequence when mastering grammar for communicative use'.

Based on current evidence, it can be argued that this constitutes the most useful advice we can currently provide to the majority of mainstream primary and secondary teachers, especially those working in challenging contexts when introducing new language (both lexis and grammar). Not only does it fit well with the demand for them to teach to often overloaded, externally-imposed, synthetic syllabuses, it is also consistent with best practice in mainstream education (the context in which most English is taught worldwide), two factors that Widdowson (1990) argues cannot be overlooked if we seek to understand the relationship between syllabus and methodology in practice.

The limitations of PPP
At this point it is important to emphasise that PPP cannot and should not be promoted as a framework for structuring all lesson types. It is of less use at higher levels of proficiency and with very young learners. Even in contexts where it is appropriate, it should not be seen as the only planning/structuring paradigm. Given the likely

importance of developing both extensive and intensive input and output opportunities in the target language (Swan 2006), PPP should be promoted alongside appropriate paradigms for skills development, such as the 'pre, during and post' structure for receptive skills lessons (see: e.g. Harmer 2007: 270–271) commonly used in initial training contexts and carried forward into the practices of novice teachers (Harris 2015). Ur's *Mix and Match* solution (2011: 518–519), including five suggested procedures of which PPP is only one, may also provide useful variety, enabling skilful teachers to tailor lesson design to intended outcome (Ur's 5 Options are: 1. Task plus focus on form; 2. Grammar explanation plus practice [i.e. PPP]; 3. Communication; 4. Consciousness-raising; 5. Exemplar-learning).

Conclusion

In this article I have explored the origins and historical fortunes of the PPP lesson structuring paradigm in English language teaching. I have cited important evidence from SLA research and skill learning theory in support of PPP. I have described three contexts in which I believe PPP can work effectively, and described a procedure for using it in the language classroom that draws upon SLA research evidence and best practice in mainstream education for justification. I have also discussed the limitations of PPP, stressing that it must not be used in isolation and that a course of learning also requires opportunities for both extensive and intensive skills practice for learners to benefit fully. Where it is used to help teachers improve their practice, the importance of the production phase, which is often shortened or omitted in practice (e.g. Sato 2010; Choi & Andon 2014), should be emphasised.

PPP has endured because many learners, teachers and teacher educators find it useful and familiar, similar to paradigms found in other areas of education. Given the current long-term trend that is seeing the majority of English language teaching worldwide move from tertiary to secondary and primary contexts (Graddol 2006), where many teachers are often trained to teach a range of subjects with limited subject-specific pedagogy, PPP is likely to remain popular. In order to improve the quality of education in such classrooms, I suggest that, rather than rejecting it or attempting to replace it with alternatives, teacher educators are likely to make greater gains by helping teachers to understand how to use PPP more effectively.

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