Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT): A Defence and a Critique

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要旨

(PPP) Presentation, Practice and Production 授業は、言語教育の於いて古くから使われている論理的な手法です。しかし、PPP の授業展開には指摘も多く、近年 TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching) が注目を集めています。本論文では、PPP より TBLT の方が効果的だと指摘されている件について考察し、その指摘内容を分析している。次に TBLT の〝タスク〟の定義について検証し、TBLT とは何かを論じている。続いて、PPP の代替として Willis (1996) によって支持された TBLT の構成を検証し、日本の教育現場に置いて TBLT を使う有効性、および利点・不利点を述べている。結論として、PPP は排除されるべきではなく、〝タスク〟は言語学習においてとても重要であるが、TBLT のみを取り入れるのは時間的に効果的ではなく、すべての学生に役立つとは考え難いと言えるだろう。
キーワード
・Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP)
・Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

1. Introduction

Teaching any living foreign/second language has as its goal the ability for every student to effectively understand and communicate with people who use that particular language for any number of different purposes. Teachers need to help learners develop this ability from zero to ever increasing degrees of competence until they reach the requisite level of proficiency for their intended and expected usages. Such students already have a developed L1 to express meaning and require a way to do this in an L2. Therefore in EFL/ESOL contexts meaning is markedly primary and expression is secondary. We need to teach people how to say and write what they want to express and understand what they hear and read. In order to achieve this goal, various approaches, methods and procedures have been utilized. Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) has traditionally been considered an appropriate and successful means of teaching a foreign or second

language.   However, PPP has increasingly been criticized and blamed for the supposedly large numbers of students who are unable to communicate effectively after following such a conventional programme of language learning and its failure to take into account the research findings of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (D. Willis, 1990; Long and Crookes, 1992; Lewis, 1996; Skehan, 1996a/b; Willis, 2005; Willis and Willis, 2007).   Critics have instead advocated Tasked-based Language Teaching (TBLT), which has in turn been challenged by others such as Sheen (1994) and Swan (2005), which have in turn been addressed by Ellis (2009), and TBLT has also been challenged in its particular application to language teaching in Japan by Burrows (2008) and Sato (2010).

The debate revolves around different syllabus types.   Wilkins (1976) made a distinction between *synthetic* and *analytic* syllabi.   In a synthetic syllabus the target language is presented in discrete segments and the student has to synthesize these into a meaningful whole.   In contrast, with an analytic syllabus purposeful language is presented as a whole and the student has to be able to analyze and recognize the structure.   Further, syllabi can be classified as Type A or B (White, 1988).   Type A refers to a syllabus where the target language to be taught has been pre-selected without negotiation with the learner and Type B where negotiation of what is to be learnt and how has taken place between students and teacher.   Most teachers who have classes for teaching English oral communication to Japanese university students in Japan use textbooks that typically follow a structural, synthetic, Type A syllabus.   The grammar is usually presented in communicative contexts, followed by practice exercises that then lead into freer speaking activities which are conducted in pairs, groups and/or as a whole class.   The procedure is PPP, but I consider that the approach is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

In this essay I will consider the perceived problems with PPP that motivate a move towards TBLT.   Next I will discuss some problems of defining what tasks are and hence what TBLT is.   Following this I will examine a framework of TBLT proposed by Willis (1996) and comment on its appropriateness for the teaching situation in Japan and consider some of the advantages and disadvantages of implementing it.   I will conclude that PPP should not be dispensed with and although tasks are immensely important in learning I think that to solely adopt Willis' TBLT framework would not lead to an efficient use of time nor necessarily

help students communicate more effectively.

2. Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP)

One of the motivating factors for TBLT has been the apparent failings of PPP. In this section I will first consider how best it is to classify PPP and TBLT before outlining and addressing the perceived problems with PPP.

2.1. Is PPP an Approach or a Procedure?

Willis (2005: 4) uses the term *approach* to refer to PPP but Richards and Rodgers (2014: 54) use *procedure*. What do these terms mean and does this make a difference to understanding Willis' rejection of PPP?

Through revising and adapting an original scheme by Anthony (1963) to describe the theory and practice of language teaching and learning Richards and Rodgers (2014) propose a tripartite hierarchical framework: approach, design and procedure. These are defined as follows:

- *Approach* "refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching" (2014: 22).
- *Design* refers to the methods of instruction: the objectives, the syllabus, the tasks and teaching activities, the roles of learners and teacher and also what teaching materials will be used (2014: 29).
- *Procedure* refers to "the actual moment-to-moment techniques, practices, and behaviors that operate in teaching a language" (2014: 35).

From this framework PPP is a *procedure* of teaching and not an *approach*. As TBLT is usually characterized as an *approach* (Richards and Rodgers, 2014: 174) Willis and other critics could therefore be making a *category-mistake* (Ryle, 1949: 17-18) in that you cannot argue against PPP as an approach when it is a procedure as they belong to different categories. However, Willis was probably not using the term *approach* with the associated meaning given to it by Richards and Rodgers, but using it more generally having an equivalent meaning to *procedure* – the steps

undertaken to teach a foreign/second language. Still, Willis (1996: 134-135) and Willis and Willis (2007: 16-18) reject this procedure. Why? One reason might be its association with the Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching, which took a *structural view* of language and where in the past there was an excessive focus on the presentation of grammar, strict adherence to accuracy during practice through drilling and substitution tables, and limited scope for creative production (Richards and Rodgers, 2014: 44-57). This was based upon the now discredited behaviourist theory of language learning, which led to the automation of responses (Willis, 1996: 135). If Willis (1996) is rejecting such classroom practices I can only concur with her. However, as Willis and others, in championing TBLT, are rejecting PPP outright as a *procedure*, I have to disagree because I think PPP has a place in the toolkit of CLT and should not be discarded. Indeed, other pro-task linguists (Ellis, 2009: 221; Skehan, 1996: 39) think that TBLT can be compatible with PPP.

2.2. Arguments against PPP

In the following sections I will analyze some commonplace arguments against PPP that provide motivation for TBLT. As Willis (1996) has argued strongly against it I will present her points and give my reasons why I think they are invalid and hence why PPP should not be rejected.

2.2.1. Arguments against PPP: Completion of a task without using the target structure

Willis (1996: 134) sees a problem with PPP in that students can sometimes complete the *production* phase by not using the targeted structure. But this point does not invalidate PPP – it merely shows that the *production* exercise was badly prepared, if it was designed exclusively to practise a specified structure, to allow for this to happen. Or if the students still cannot cope with the targeted structure in the controlled practice stage then the production phase should not have been given. Therefore, this is no vindication against PPP but illustrates a miscalculation by the teacher to proceed to an activity in which the students were not at an appropriate level to engage in.

2.2.2. Arguments against PPP: Overuse of target structures

In addition, Willis (1996: 134) finds it problematic that students taught using PPP "tend to overuse the target form, and make very stilted and unnatural conversation" because they are still "in practice mode". Personally, I do not find a problem with this as it is part of the natural learning process to internalize the structure. Of course, as teachers, we want our students to produce natural sounding language, but this naturalness will develop as the students continue their studies and as they become more proficient a point will be reached when the students are no longer in a practice phase.

2.2.3. Arguments against PPP: "illusion of mastery"

Further, Willis (1996: 134) notes that PPP fails because it gives an "illusion of mastery" in that once outside the classroom or in a different lesson students cannot use the previously taught structure. Again this is an unreasonable criticism as it can take any number of exposures and use of any structure before students can fully assimilate it into their *transitional competence* (Corder, 1967: 166-167), a notion that the contemporary term 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972: 214) bears similarity to (Gass & Selinker, 1994: 11, fn.3), in their becoming proficient users. This is true not only of a PPP procedure but also of other lessons using different styles of teaching including TBLT.

2.2.4. Arguments against PPP: Restriction of language

What is more, Willis (1996: 135) states, "Unfortunately the PPP cycle restricts the learner's experience of language by focusing on a single item." Why is this unfortunate? From my experience of trying to learn a foreign language I have been only too pleased to be presented with a single focus of grammar to help me get to grips with the language. Being flooded with a barrage of different lexis and grammar is overwhelming. Later she writes, "The irony is that the goal of the final 'P' – free production – is not achieved. How can production be 'free' if students are required to produce forms that have been specified in advance?" (1996: 135). But this criticism does not invalidate PPP and misses the point of the

procedure. The P's are steps to aid the learner climb the linguistic ladder and as the learner climbs there is less emphasis on the presentation and practice and more focus on the production for any target language and when the top has been reached the learner, as Wittgenstein (1922: §6.54) metaphorically wrote, can throw away the ladder. It is a series of steps that supports the student as they move from a state of not knowing the language to a position of greater proficiency, and if a student is subsequently able to use the targeted grammatical structure within a controlled practice exercise and later in a freer exercise then progress has been made. Certainly, the final P on the initial contact with the structure will unlikely be totally free, and I think it is highly unrealistic for Willis to expect such an outcome, but the learner has made progress and it is the job of the teacher to give opportunities later for the student to re-use the structure in more open activities, which is where I believe tasks play a vital role, and help the student develop from a novice to a proficient user of the structure.

2.2.5. Arguments against PPP: Language learning is not additive

Willis (1996: 135) notes that "language learning rarely happens in an additive fashion". Indeed, SLA research shows that "people do not learn isolated items in the L2 one at a time in an additive, linear fashion, but as parts of complex mappings of groups of form-function relationships" and "Progress is not even unidirectional. Second language acquisition (SLA) frequently involves temporary 'deterioration' in learner performance (so-called backsliding), giving rise to U-shaped and zig-zag developmental curves" (Long and Crookes, 1992: 31). As Willis and Willis (2007: 179) note this non-linearity creates a contradiction because "in a sense, language teaching must be additive. We cannot attempt to teach the whole language at once." And from this problem TBLT is advocated as the preferred solution. However, proponents of PPP and the associated synthetic Type A syllabus can address these points, too. Of course students do not acquire language linearly, and although there are relatively fixed developmental sequences in learning, for example, with negation, questions, possessive determiners, relative clauses and the past (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 85-92) there will be personal differences in the rate at which individuals acquire the targeted language and when they do so. Indeed, even something so seemingly simple as the articles *a*, *an* and *the* cause problems for advanced learners. By designing recycling in a structured

synthetic Type A syllabus with rich input, teachers in their sequential lessons can provide learners with repeated exposure to various language items and opportunities to use them in 'complex mappings of form-function relationships.' What is more, despite SLA research findings, countless people throughout time have successfully learnt languages through PPP (Swan, 2005: 386), so the procedure cannot be totally without merit.

2.2.6. Summary

A major strength of PPP is that it is a very logical procedure to language learning and I find the criticisms above unconvincing and think that PPP has a role in CLT, especially when introducing new grammatical structures, and should not be rejected from any teacher's toolkit. Any perceived failings in PPP are not due to its intrinsic logic, but to the way practitioners have implemented it, as was the case with an unsuccessful implementation of TBLT in Hong Kong (Ellis, 2009: 240-241).

So far I have shown why PPP should not be rejected and also that some linguists note that it is not incompatible with TBLT. I consider my teaching situation to be CLT, from which TBLT is seen to have developed (Willis and Willis, 2007: 11). In the next section I will investigate the definition of tasks in order to ascertain how TBLT tries to differentiate itself from CLT and PPP.

3. Defining Tasks

Defining tasks is more difficult than one would have imagined and there is no single definition "because the study and description of task has been approached from different perspectives and for different purposes" (Shehadeh, 2005: 17), from researchers gathering data on SLA to teachers' focus on class activities. The notion of task is thus rather vague, and yet it has been presented as a dichotomy between controlled language practice and authentic, purposeful communication (Willis, 1996: 23). Littlewood (2007: 247), however, conceives a 5-stage cline of activities between these two extremes (see Appendix) recognizing that elements of meaningful communication can be used to practise specific aspects of language. This is a perceptive observation and one that teachers need to keep in mind when

deciding upon appropriate activities to aid students' learning.

TBLT tends to focus its definitions of task upon the most meaning-oriented end of Littlewood's cline. Considering definitions of tasks given by Nunan, Skehan, and Bachman and Palmer, Willis and Willis (2007:13) list six questions we can ask to determine how task-like an activity is.

> 1. Does the activity engage learners' interest?
> 2. Is there a primary focus on meaning?
> 3. Is there an outcome?
> 4. Is success judged in terms of outcome?
> 5. Is completion a priority?
> 6. Does the activity relate to real world activities?

These are pertinent questions that apply as much to the tasks given in a CLT lesson as those in a TBLT lesson. However, as the authors acknowledge, these questions will not provide a watertight definition of a task (Willis and Willis, 2007: 13). Further, Willis and Willis (2007: 14) quote Skehan,

> …some of the time it may be difficult to decide whether an activity merits the label 'task' since the two underlying characteristics of tasks, avoidance of specific structures and encouragement in worthwhile meanings, are matters of degree, rather than being categorical. (1998: 96)

Such a quote vindicates Littlewood's cline and yet it is worrying when strong advocates of TBLT cannot decide upon a definition for "the central building blocks" (Harmer, 2009: 174) upon which their approach is based and distinguish between activities that are tasks and those which are not. Further, there are no differences between tasks given in TBLT and those found in CLT. Tasks can be real-world focused or pedagogic (Nunan, 2012: 20-21); they can be listing, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, problem solving, as well as doing projects and sharing personal experiences (Willis and Willis, 2007: 253); they can be closed, semi-closed/open and open (Willis. 1996: 28) and they can be input-providing and output-prompting (Ellis, 2009: 224).

What is more, these tasks can be used in each stage of a PPP cycle. The target

language can be presented via a listening or reading task or by requiring students to unscramble a series of words to make grammatical sentences. The target language can also be practised via purposeful speaking tasks. To give an example, Willis (1996: 25) notes that a controlled language practice such as, "*In pairs, ask and answer questions using 'Do you like…?' 'Yes I do/No I don't'*" is not a task as it focuses only on students producing the correct form. However, this could be made into a task and to practise the language at the same time by asking students to ask everyone in the class *Do you like…?* questions to find the five most popular things students in the class like. Finally, the target language can be used in the production stage for any number of real-life communicative situations by any one of the task types identified by Willis and Willis (2007: 253). A PPP procedure and tasks are therefore most definitely compatible. Nonetheless, advocates of TBLT want to distinguish it from other approaches and in the next section I will examine how advocates perceive TBLT.

4. What is TBLT?

Long and Crookes (1992) draw our attention to three types of syllabus designs based on tasks – procedural (Prabhu, 1984), process (Breen, 1984) and what is currently referred to as TBLT. Ellis (2009: 225) points out that TBLT is not monolithic and is implemented in a variety of ways. However, the defining feature of these is that tasks are placed as the central planning unit of a syllabus and not used merely as a communicative activity found in CLT. It must be remembered that this represents the strong version of TBLT and that there is a weaker version which Ellis (2003: 27) calls *task-supported language teaching*, which is compatible with CLT using synthetic Type A syllabi.

TBLT could be Type A, where the teacher determines what tasks the students perform. An example of this (Willis and Willis, 2007: 182-183) appears to be Moser's implementation of TBLT at Osaka Shoin Women's University in Japan using, among other books, *Touchstone 1* (McCarthy et. al. 2005), which follows a synthetic Type A syllabus. This adaption appears sensible and pragmatic but raises the question whether the implementation is truly TBLT or standard CLT. TBLT can also be presented as Type B where the teacher and students negotiate what is to be learned and how. Long and Crookes (1992: 40-41) make the following analogy,

> To use a medical analogy, we would like to have patients able to choose from among a range of alternative treatments, but expect the physician to limit their choices to remedies for what ails them.

To me this is ideal, but in the majority of situations of teaching at various educational establishments, each with their own policy, and teaching ten or more classes a week of about 25 students with quite widely ranging abilities and motivations, impractical. In a practical world a synthetic Type A syllabus with a focus on communicative activities is realistic and sensible.

5. Willis' Procedure of a Task-based Learning Framework

Willis (1996) is a strong advocate of TBLT and her framework (Fig. 1) is widely known. In this section I would like to examine the tripartite framework she gives for TBLT (Pre-task, Task Cycle, and Language Focus) and comment on its appropriateness for teaching oral communication to Japanese university students in Japan. The framework provides learners with *exposure, use*, and *motivation*, which Willis (1996: 11) notes are three essential conditions for language learning, and also *instruction*. This framework appears to rearrange the PPP procedure as Present, Produce and Practice. As Willis (1996: 40) notes,

> …the teaching techniques required for task-based learning are not very different from those of ordinary mainstream language teaching. The differences lie in the ordering and weighting of activities and in the fact that there is a greater amount of student activity, and less direct, up-front teaching.

5.1 Pre-task Phase

The purpose of the pre-task phase is to introduce the topic, explain the task, elicit related vocabulary and phrases and allow students time to prepare for the task. Willis (1996: 43) states that this phase "is certainly not to teach one particular grammatical structure…" Well, if the task is being set up to revise previously taught language or as a means of evaluating students' communicative competence then I can understand this instruction. However, if the task is being set up for

teaching new language structures for real-life communicative situations then I would have thought introducing relevant grammar prior to the task would greatly facilitate the successful completion of the task and provide the students with a greater sense of achievement of having learnt something new and be able to use the targeted structure for a realistic communicative activity where meaning is central. How can a novice learner talk about something without first being presented with the requisite language? If it is permissible to pre-teach vocabulary in order to facilitate the completion of a task, then why not grammar, especially in the early stages of language learning? With any classroom activity it is important

Exposure	**Pre-task** Introduction to topic and task	Instruction
Exposure	**Task Cycle** Task	Use (spontaneous)
Exposure	Planning	Instruction (as needed)
Exposure (planned)	Report	Use (Planned)
Exposure	Students hear task recording or read a text	
	Language focus	
Exposure	Analysis and practice:	Instruction / Use (restricted)
Exposure	Review and repeat task	Use (spontaneous)

Fig. 1. Outline of the procedure for Task-based Learning
(Adapted from Willis 1996: 135)

to have a post-task language analysis where errors or weaknesses identified by the teacher are worked on with exercises or explanations, and this can also include new, unpredicted language that occurred during the task. Doing this immediately after the activity is important because the teacher can draw students' attention to the problems when they are fresh in the students' minds and hence the corrections can be seen as relevant and hence there is a higher chance of students learning from these errors. But to forbid the pre-teaching of any one grammatical structure seems to me misguided.

5.2. Task Cycle Phase

The second phase of Willis' scheme of TBLT, Task Cycle, has three parts: the task, planning a report and presenting the report. I have no questions about introducing a task phase except, as mentioned before, that tasks can be used for any of the stages in a PPP procedure. I do however question the report phase.

5.3. Report Phase

Why does there need to be a report after doing a task? Willis (1996: 54-54) thinks that tasks by themselves are not sufficient because the focus is on fluency and conveying meaning rather than grammatical accuracy. The report phase is "when groups report briefly in spoken or written form to the whole class on some aspect of their task" (Willis, 1996: 55) and through this public performance students will be more focused on accuracy. This is all well and good for small classes, but when you have about 25 students in an oral communication class there is going to be a lot of time spent not doing any oral communication as students write their reports and a lot of blank faces as the class listens to them. Willis (1996: 58) suggests the reports might last from between 20 seconds to 2 minutes. Taking a class size of 20 students and an upper limit of 2 minutes per presentation by pairs of students this means 20 minutes of a 90-minute lesson could be taken up with 18 students at any one time not talking. Given that non-speaking time, for sake of argument, 10 minutes, maybe required to prepare the report then a third of an oral communication class could be spent not talking. This is an excessive loss of speaking time. Willis (1996: 58) notes, "It will probably not be feasible or

advisable to let every pair report in full." But if you have given a task it is unfair not to allow some students to report their results. The point I want to make here is not that I am against students reporting the findings of their tasks, which I think has a very important role in language learning, but that this has to be nuanced with the time constraints of a curriculum. I think to prescribe, as Willis does in her framework of TBLT, that every task has to have a report stage can be an inefficient use of class time.

5.4 Language Focus Phase

During this phase students work on "the language forms that were actually used or needed during the cycle" (Willis, 1996: 102) through consciousness-raising activities where "students have to identify and think about particular features of language form and language use" (ibid.). Such noticing and critical thinking exercises are important for language acquisition and help to prevent fossilization. But as I mentioned before, if the purpose of the task is to introduce a new target structure, and students need this structure to complete the task more successfully, then the language focus should be presented or reviewed prior to the task.

6. Conclusion

I find Willis's TBLT framework admirable in placing a focus on meaning and giving students tasks to complete that encourage them to draw upon their linguistic resources and which are very motivational. Her framework is ideal for students who already have a solid grounding in grammar and need the opportunity to practise using their language for purposeful communication where errors and gaps in their interlanguage can be identified and later corrected to prevent fossilization. The framework is also ideal for revision and assessing students' communicative abilities. However, I find the framework unconvincing when it comes to introducing new target language with the re-ordering of the PPP cycle and the danger of the report phase taking too long. I would therefore not support the implementation of TBLT as the sole framework for classes. PPP should not be rejected outright and as shown is fully compatible with tasks, which are extremely important for language learning. What is important is that teachers utilize the most appropriate procedures for their individual classes, whether that be TBLT or

a PPP procedure using a synthetic Type A syllabus within CLT.

Appendix: Littlewood's Cline of Pedagogic Tasks

1. At the most form-focused end of the continuum is NON-COMMUNICATIVE LEARNING, which includes, for example, grammar exercises, substitution drills and pronunciation drills.
2. We then move to PRE-COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICE, in which the focus is still primarily on language but also oriented towards meaning. An example of this is the familiar 'question-and-answer' practice, in which the teacher asks questions to which everyone knows the answer.
3. With the third category, COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICE, we come to activities in which learners still work with a predictable range of language but use it to convey information. These include, for example, activities in which learners use recently taught language as a basis for information exchange or to conduct a survey amongst their classmates.
4. In the fourth category, STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION, the main focus moves to the communication of meanings, but the teacher structures the situation to ensure that learners can cope with it with their existing language resources, including perhaps what they have recently used in more form-focused work. This category includes more complex information-exchange activities or structured role-playing tasks.
5. Finally, at the most meaning-oriented end of the continuum, AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION comprises activities in which there is the strongest focus on the communication of messages and the language forms are correspondingly unpredictable. Examples are discussion, problem-solving, content-based tasks and larger-scale projects.

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