Diversifying PPP Lesson Design at the Elementary Level: EFL Teaching Experience in Ukraine

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The PPP lesson design (Presentation, Practice, Production) is widely accepted by many teachers of English the world over, especially when English is taught as a foreign language (i.e., outside an English-speaking country). For instance, Rockwell (1998b, p. 10) complains that "On the RSA Certificate in TEFLA it is touted as the best—and indeed the only approach to teaching an EFL class." This lesson design is followed in the most popular coursebooks of English that are in greatest use in practically all European countries—such as the *Headway* series by Soars and Soars (1993) or the *Matters* series by Bell and Gower (1998). In Eastern Europe, specifically in Ukraine and other counties of the former USSR, PPP (though often named differently) is also not only the most popular but practically the only accepted lesson design, since it is taught as such to all the future teachers of English as a foreign language. My observations of the TESOL Practice course in the USA (the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia) have shown that the same lesson design is also recommended to teachers of English in that country. My observations have also shown it is followed by practical teachers in classes of English as a second language both at the above-mentioned US university and at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

A Rationale

It may be said that in practice, this lesson structure under discussion is very popular in ESL/EFL (at least, in Europe and North America). At the same time, it is often criticized in the professional literature (though the criticism in no way diminishes its popularity in practical teaching).

One of the most recent debates on PPP was held in *IATEFL Issues* in 1998. The two articles by Chris Rockwell (1998a; 1998b) started the debate (see also, Woodward, 1998; Gary, 1998; Gabrielatos, 1998), in which it was pointed out that the PPP framework is "too slow, cumbersome and limited in its scope" (Rockwell, 1998b, p. 10), "the hard PPP structure . . . leaves little room for flexibility" (Gabrielatos, 1998, p. 11), and may generally be considered a thing of the past (Woodward, 1998). It can be added that in the context of teaching English as a *foreign* language (especially in such

countries as the Ukraine where there are practically no opportunities for students to come into contact with the target language outside the classroom), the PPP structure often tends to become counter-communicative and counter-productive.

Why this is so is explained by Rockwell, who writes that "The PPP lesson often ignores the sheer volume of materials that teachers feel obliged to get through for examination and other purposes" (1998b, p. 10), "in this way the program may well be reduced to grammar and vocabulary teaching, neglecting skills development" (Gabrielatos, 1998, p. 11). That is just what often happens in Ukraine. In the conditions of that country, English is taught as a foreign language with practically no input in English (comprehensible or not) received by students outside the classroom. Lack of input requires greater focusing on language forms than in second language contexts (Tarnopolsky, 1997). This is recognized by many authors writing about EFL in comparison with ESL. For instance, McDonough and Shaw (1993, p. 35) point out that ". . . a more grammatically oriented syllabus is to be preferred in a context where English is a foreign language and where learners are unlikely to be exposed to it."

But greater attention to focusing on language forms takes place in the situation where the time of students' classroom exposure to English is, as a rule, quite limited (in the Ukraine it mostly does not exceed 2-4 hours per week, and only short-term intensive English programs have from 6-12 class hours per week). Observations of the methods followed by Ukrainian teachers of English in secondary schools and universities have shown that in these conditions they often turn to totally grammar-focused teaching. The great volume of materials stipulated by the curriculum forces them to neglect the development of learners' communication skills. It means that the simplest version of PPP is followed: present new language and rules governing its use, then practice it in more or less drill-like activities. In this case, even the third P (produce) is sometimes neglected.

Thus, it may be said that, at least in the conditions of EFL teaching practice in Ukraine, the current criticism of the PPP lesson structure is justified. Then the question arises, why in the Ukraine and other countries do both practical teachers and developers of popular coursebooks, such as *Headway* or *Matters*, still most often choose PPP (especially at the elementary level, when, as Woodward (1998) notes, there are other alternatives of designing lessons from which the teacher is free to choose)?

It is probably so because, leaving aside the question whether at intermediate or advanced levels other lesson structures are more efficient and desirable, at the elementary EFL level the choice is rather limited. We can begin an EFL course either following the way suggested by the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1983), i.e., with a long incubation period, or, with something like a PPP structure. The first way,

which depends on students getting rich and varied comprehensible input, is not acceptable for EFL because, with the learners' limited exposure to English, the incubation period may take years so that students will come to the end of the course having no opportunities of experiencing production. But if the Natural Approach is not good for the EFL elementary level, it is difficult to imagine any other effective approach at this stage (when learners have hardly any English vocabulary or grammar at their disposal) than to: 1) present samples of communication, 2) make students practice similar pieces of communication in guided intercourse, and 3) thus pave the road to their own free communication where the language learned in presentation and practice is produced for attaining self-set communicative goals.

The latter choice is certainly PPP, though its form described above cannot be reproached for the lack of communicative focus or focus on production. It means that the criticism of PPP, boiling down to the lack of communicative orientation in it and its inflexibility, concerns the practical application of such a lesson design more than the design itself. Its frequent association with teaching grammar and not communication is not the fault of PPP, but the fault of implementing old-fashioned methods of teaching using its framework. In itself, PPP is nothing more than a general principle of organizing lessons—this principle being logical from the points of view of both teachers and students, easy to implement, and amenable to different approaches and contents of teaching. For instance, it can be used with various teaching methods—from grammar-translation (present new language and explain it with no reference to communication, practice it in drills, produce new utterances by constructing them according to rules) to communicative (present new language in communication, practice it in guided students' communication, produce in students' free communication). That is exactly the reason for PPP popularity and preferences given to it in teaching practice—in particular (but not only) at the elementary level.

At this point, disagreement should be voiced with one aspect of Lowe's (1999) argumentation in defense of PPP for teaching Business English. Lowe is certainly right when he writes that students of Business English should develop fluency and accuracy hand-in-hand, and that PPP is probably the best way for maintaining their balance. But it is difficult to side with Lowe when he considers PPP only as a means of developing accuracy. Indeed, traditionally, PPP is often thought of as a focus-on-language-forms lesson design, but there is no logical reason for this point of view (at least, in EFL where genuine communication with native speakers during the course of learning is practically excluded, and any communication in English in the classroom is modeled, i.e., more or less artificial). It has been pointed out above that PPP, as just a principle of designing lessons, is indifferent to what we present, practice, and produce—pieces of language or pieces of communication. Between the two extremes—filling the PPP framework with

focus on language (accuracy) only and filling it with focus on communication (fluency) only—there is a wide range of combining and interchanging foci on fluency and on accuracy.

The question remains how to ensure the communicative orientation of PPP at the elementary level and how to prevent teachers from filling the PPP format with focus on grammar instead of focus on communication. To help them avoid this, EFL teachers teaching English at this stage should be given precise recommendations as to effective structuring of a communication-oriented lesson of English within the general framework of PPP. A great variety of such alternative versions of PPP communication-oriented structures should be supplied to a practical teacher to choose from, in accordance with her/his particular needs, situation, and local conditions.

As to the inflexibility of PPP, this reproach is generated by the kind of lesson typically structured as follows: "1. Warmer 2. Set the scene (usually with pictures) 3. Preteach vocabulary 4. Establish the concepts 5. Check the concepts 6. Elicit the marker sentence 7. Drill the marker sentence 8. Controlled practice 9. Free(er) practice 10. Feedback of errors" (Rockwell, 1998a, p. 9).

Such a rigid lesson structure (not very communication-oriented by the way) does in fact exist. It is followed in a number of coursebooks and rather wide-spread in teaching practice. But there is absolutely nothing to prove that only this structure follows from the PPP as a general principle of designing lessons, is obligatory for that designing or even, for that matter, desirable. On the contrary, PPP as a general principle allows for a very broad variety of different specific lesson structures of which the one above is nothing more than one of many alternatives. But practical teachers should be made aware of the range of alternatives, and not limit themselves to a single one.

Below, a Ukranian experience in introducing a lesson structure that does not follow the rigid pattern described above (Rockwell, 1998a), but is still within the PPP framework, is discussed. That structure was designed for the EFL elementary level.

The purpose of further discussion is to demonstrate the opportunity of diversity and variations within the PPP design so as to deprive it of two shortcomings that are not inherent to it but that are, nevertheless, often criticized as its proper faults—rigid structure and lack of orientation towards developing "one size fits all" learners' communication skills. The PPP lesson design version suggested below is of quite a different structure as compared to the traditional one above and is totally communication oriented. It is considered as an example for demonstrating that the general PPP lesson design is quite flexible, i.e., amenable to developing different alternatives on its basis in accordance with specific needs.

Context for Developing a PPP Alternative

An alternative lesson design was elaborated for an intensive English program of oral communication. This program was first introduced into teaching practice in one of the largest Ukrainian cities, Dnepropetrovsk, in 1993, and it has been successfully taught there since that time. The program was developed for adult and/or adolescent learners from the age of 13 and up. It was designed primarily for false beginners—those who mainly needed Survival English.

The Survival English oral course was 14 weeks long, with 12 hours of classes a week. Classes are held 3 times a week in the evening and/or on weekends with 4 hours for every class. A weekly cycle of 3 classes is considered as one learning unit. A specific format CPGCP-LFPP-P labeled (Communicative Presentation/Guided Communication Practice/Language Focused Presentation and Practice/Production) was elaborated for such a three-part learning unit (lesson).

CPGCP-LFPP-P Format Outline

1st class (4 hours):

Communicative Presentation. Students listen to a lengthy audiotaped conversation. The first time listening is for general comprehension. The second time is for full, detailed comprehension. This second time, students are listening as they follow what they hear in a printed tapescript. Detailed comprehension is achieved thanks to the teacher's prompts and inclusion of parallel written translations of tapescript parts into the learner's mother tongue. Though the audiotaped conversation may have a great amount of new vocabulary and grammar, no attempt is made at this stage to focus students' attention on them—all new language material is perceived by learners in a fully integrated manner, within its communicative context.

Guided Communication Practice. Students try to make similar conversations imitating the situation and topic of the model one, but "place themselves in the shoes" of interlocutors in it with relevant vocabulary alteration in what they say. When learners do this, they use the tapescript for speech support. For instance, the interlocutors in an audiotaped conversation meet, get introduced, and talk about their lives, families, etc. The students do the same, but speak about themselves (names, occupations, etc.). Or if the model dialogue is about asking and finding the way, the students may speak about a city well-known to them. This work is done either in pairs or in small groups with the teacher circulating among them rendering assistance, giving corrections, prompts, stimuli for continued talking, etc. Continuous "speech support" in the form of a printed text and prompts from the teacher make conversing possible for students—this conversing serving to provide retention of material in the process of practicing. During

the class, students hold a great number of guided conversations so as to ensure multiple use of all new language forms. Every new guided conversation is progressively more distanced from the audiotaped model. It requires substitutions of vocabulary and continuous "reshuffling" of what was heard in the model, but allows operating with the same grammatical forms and structures. For example, if in the model and first guided conversations the interlocutors talked about the cities they lived in, their history, places of interest, etc., following it, students may be asked to stage a small-group role-play using role-cards distributed by the teacher. In the play, a family who is planning summer vacations is engaged in discussing the cities they would like to visit and their places of interest. The more complicated guided communication practice gets, the more it is supported not only by tapescripts but also by detailed prompt-cards with descriptions of situations, interlocutors' roles, and some key words typed on them.

2nd class (4 hours):

Language Focused Presentation. Students analyze, with the teacher's assistance, new grammar and some interesting or difficult points in the new vocabulary list i.e., those new language forms introduced during the preceding class that learners have already used in their own speech. The teacher focuses the students' attention on these points utilizing tapescripts for it. S/he tries to help students formulate relevant grammar rules inductively on the basis of examples from the tapescripts and their own communicative experience gained in the former class.

Language Focused Practice. Students practice in consciously using the presented grammar and vocabulary. Practicing is done in specially designed activities focusing on elements of language being trained, but these activities imitate communication to a certain degree by providing learners with a communicative purpose or/and communicative situation. For instance, "Clarify details of information concerning the sea-side city that you will hear (read) about. For asking questions to clarify details, use the prompts given below"—these prompts being the required question words of the wh- type, some names of things or places that are supposed to be used for clarification of details, etc. Thus, Ur's (1990) recommendation to teach grammar in connection with communication are followed. Grammar-focused learning activities (exercises) are done by every student working individually, first with a computer, and after that, with a cassette-recorder (in a language laboratory). In the first case, a student types his/her responses to computer-supplied stimuli. In the second case, a student has to make responses in pauses on the tape preceding clues for self-checking and self-correction (see Tarnopolsky, 2001). In both cases, every student in a group has a full share of the practice (which is impossible if similar exercises are done in teacher-fronted or style pair work style).

3rd class (4 hours):

Production. This component of the format is considered to be the principal one as it is fully assigned to what most closely models genuine communication in the target language. Students take part in role-plays; in pair, small group and whole class discussions; in brainstorming some issue in small groups; in making mini-presentations, narrating some experience, describing something, or giving their opinions on a certain issue, etc. Doing that, they have no artificial speech supports, such as printed texts, prompt-cards, etc. They are to use the newly learned language material and mobilize all the other material at their disposal to achieve the communicative goals in a given communicative situation according to their own understanding of that situation and according to their own communicative needs and intentions. Nothing else regulates the language form or the subject matter of their speech. The teacher can only describe the situation, but everything else must be done by learners themselves conversing (role-playing, discussing some issue, etc.) in pairs or groups. The role-play "At the Customs-Office" may be given as an example. Two students are assigned the roles of immigration and customs officers. The other students are "people just arrived." They are in lines and, while waiting, talk in pairs or in groups of three about the reasons of their coming, previous visits to this country, local customs regulations, etc. Approaching the officers, everybody in turn passes through the standard procedure which could be diversified at will: the customs officer finds something unauthorized in somebody's luggage, one new-comer turns out to be a smuggler or an international criminal, another one has some problem with his/her visa, and such like.

Using the learning unit (lesson) format described above has demonstrated a number of its advantages when teaching English for oral everyday communication at the elementary level.

Advantages of the CPGCP-LFPP-P Lesson Format

As to its theoretical advantages, the main one is the strictly communication- and communication skills-oriented nature of the format. Another advantage is the balanced inclusion of focus-on-language-forms activities indispensable when English is not taught in an English-speaking country. The third advantage is the fact that the teaching/learning activities in this format are not all supposed to be a part of every single class. They are distributed across a learning unit of several classes. That allows for a much greater flexibility (interchanging of elements, omissions of some of them and inclusion of new ones if needed) than the traditional rigid PPP structure.

As to the practical advantages, they have been demonstrated in 8 years (since 1993) of practical teaching of more than 300 students. It has shown that the suggested lesson format and the methods of teaching used in its framework led to the majority of students' really developing speaking and listening communication skills of quite a high level for the end of elementary period of learning English. A sufficiently high level of grammatical accuracy in speaking has been observed as well. It has also been observed that in classes of Production (see above) learners start to talk in English rather confidently (shifting as well as they can even with the scanty language material they have), as a rule, not later than the fourth or fifth week. It might be so because the "Guided Communication Practice" phase built up students' confidence in their ability to communicate in English while the "Language Focused Presentation and Practice" phase ensured sufficient command of the language to support and maintain this confidence during quasi-genuine communication in the "Production" phases. An interested reader can find detailed information on practical teaching results obtained while teaching the course in Tarnopolsky (1999).

It should be emphasized that the suggested CPGCP-LFPP-P learning unit (lesson) format is nothing more than one of many possible versions of PPP. But it is free from the lack of communication orientation often ascribed to PPP and has a different structure from the rigid one that is frequently considered as something proper to that lesson design. The practical success of the suggested format in the conditions for which it was designed is a proof that PPP as a principle of lesson design is flexible enough to be adapted to different specific conditions and requirements, in particular to the requirement of teaching EFL for communication at the elementary level.

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