

PPP Basics

INTRODUCTION:

In recent years, the purely "structural" approach to language teaching has been criticized, as it tends to produce students who, despite having the ability to produce structurally accurate language, are generally deficient in their ability to use the language and understand its use in real communication.

What is the "structural" approach to language teaching? If your classroom is full of students that memorize vocabulary and grammar rules through repetition and rote learning, and are corrected for even the smallest mistake whilst speaking or writing English, then you are a champion of the structural teaching approach. No doubt your students are learning a lot of English, but how effective and how enjoyable is this process?

An approach to language teaching has been developed which attempts to overcome the weaknesses of the "structural approach" (which incidentally is the kind of teaching methodology that tends to prevail in Asian public schools). The new approach is based on viewing language as a combination of:

- a) Linguistic Structures b) Situational Settings c) Communicative Acts

This is known as the "communicative approach" to language teaching. Communication is not simply a matter of **what** is said (structure/lexis), but **where** it is said, by **whom**, **when** and **why** it is said. In short, this is basically the "communicative function" or "purpose" of language.

At the opposite extreme from the structural approach, and with at least as many flaws, is the purely "conversational" approach, where it is assumed that exposure to lots of conversation from a native English speaker will produce a high level of aptitude in the students. Whereas the structural approach promotes accuracy and tends to inhibit communicative confidence, the conversational approach tends to create communicative confidence in combination with many entrenched errors. Being keen to communicate and yet not being able to do so properly is almost as risky as knowing what to say but not having the confidence or practice to use it...

The PPP Approach to Language Teaching

The "Three Ps" approach to Language Teaching is the most common modern methodology employed by professional schools around the world. It is a strong feature of the renowned CELTA certification and other TEFL qualifications offered especially in the United Kingdom.

While this approach is generally geared toward adult learners, most of the principles involved are also essential to lessons for children (click on the "Young Learners" link above for more information). It is very important to understand what "**Presentation**", "**Practice**" and "**Production**" really are, and how they work in combination to create effective communicative language learning.

Presentation is the beginning or introduction to learning language, and Production is the culmination of the learning process, where a learner has become a "user" of the language as opposed to a "student" of the language. Practice is the process that facilitates progress from the initial stage through to the final one.

To explain the process in brief, the beginning of a lesson involves the introduction of the new language in a conceptual way in combination with some kind of real (or at least "realistic feeling") situation. When this is understood, the students are provided with a linguistic "model" to apply to the concept they have recognized. With this "model" in mind, the students practice the new language by means of various "controlled" activities. After sufficient practice, the students move into some kind of "productive" activity, where a situation calls for the language to be used naturally without correction or control.

In general, for communicative language learning to be most effective, the three stages need to occur and they must flow easily from one stage to the next.

PRESENTATION

This is the first (and perhaps most crucial) stage to the language learning process, as it usually has a profound influence on the stages that follow and governs whether those stages are effective or not.

Presentation involves the building of a situation requiring natural and logical use of the new language. When the "situation" is recognized and understood by the students, they will then start instinctively building a conceptual understanding of the meaning behind the new language, and why it will be relevant and useful to them. When the situation surrounding the new language and the conceptual meaning of it has been achieved, the new language should be introduced by means of a linguistic "model". It is this model that the students will go on to practice and hopefully achieve naturally without help during a productive activity.

For obvious reasons, it is naturally easier to "present" new language to ESL students (who are learning English as a Second Language in an English speaking environment) than it is to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, who hear little or no English outside of the classroom. EFL teachers in particular need to work hard to build "realistic" feeling situations requiring the new language. If the "situation" appears totally unreal or even farcical to the students, so too will the language they are learning.

An important aspect of introducing the situation requiring and concept underlying new language is to build them up using whatever English the students have already learned or have some access to. At lower levels, pictures and body language are typical ways of presenting new language. As students progress, dialogues and text can also be used.

There are a variety of ways in which new language items may be presented but most Presentations should have at least some of the following features: meaningful, memorable and realistic examples; logical connection; context; clear models; sufficient meaningful repetition; "staging" and "fixing"; brevity and recycling.

PRACTICE:

The Practice stage is the best known to teachers irrespective of their training or teaching objectives. However, it is a stage that is often "over-done" or used ineffectively, either because Presentation was poor (or lacking altogether) or it is not seen and used as a natural step toward Production. It is the important middle stage to communicative language teaching, but exactly that - the "middle" stage.

It is important that practice activities are appropriate to the language being learned and the level and competence of the students. Essentially Practice is the testing procedure for accuracy, and the frequency procedure for familiarity with the language. It is also a remedial stage. A good way to summarize effective Practice is to see it as repetition leading to competence and accuracy in terms of Phonology and Syntax.

Practice activities need to be clear and understandable - they should also be directed toward promoting a considerable degree of confidence in the students. In general, a carefully laid out practice activity that looks "attractive" to the eye will generate the students' motivation. They need to be challenged, but they should also feel that the activity is "within their reach".

Making a smooth transition from Presentation to Practice usually involves moving the students from the Individual Drill stage into Pair Work (chain pair-work, closed pair-work and open pair-work). Communicative practice then leads the way toward Production.

PRODUCTION:

The Production Stage is the most important stage of communicative language teaching. Successful Production is a clear indication that the language learners have made the transition from "students" of the key language to "users" of the language.

Generally Production involves creating a situation requiring the language that was introduced in the Presentation Stage. That situation should result in the students "producing" more personalized language. Production is highly dependent on the Practice Stage, because if students do not have confidence in the language then they will naturally be hesitant to independently "use" it.

One of the most important things to remember is that Production activities should not "tell" students what to say. Whereas in Practice the students had most or all of the information required, during Production they don't have the information and must think. Ideally it is challenging in that it is representative of "real life" situations.

Creating and engaging in "Productive" classroom activities can require a certain level of cognitive ability. Production activities for Young Learners in particular need to be carefully thought out and prepared.

Some good examples of effective Production activities include situational role-plays, debates, discussions, problem-solving, narratives, descriptions, quizzes and games.