

# Is this the Way to the RSA?

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In his article (II 144) Chris Rockwell criticised the PPP format - and the RSA Certificate in TEFLA which advocates it - for rigidity and limitations. Tessa Woodward in her response (II 145) clarified that the CTEFLA and its adherence to PPP belong to the past, and that the new CELTA has a much more comprehensive syllabus and flexible assessment framework.

I would like to respond to Rockwell's critique of PPP. I do agree that the hard core PPP structure (as described in p.10) leaves little room for flexibility, but I find that the arguments used against it miss the point.

The PPP framework is described as "too slow, cumbersome and limited in its scope" and four reasons are offered to support the argument (p.10). I would like to comment on each reason in turn.

1. "Adult EFL students have often had the same material/grammar 'presented' to them many times before."

It is not clear to me what is meant by "the same grammar". Effective grammar lessons need to focus on both concept and form. As a result, the same form (e.g. Present Progressive) will be dealt with in different contexts to express different concepts (action in progress now, future arrangement etc.); similarly, the different ways a given concept can be expressed will be presented (clearly *not* in the same lesson). This recycling of grammar points is necessary as it provides opportunities for learners to refine their perception of the nature of English. As Pinker puts it, "a learner assumes each meaning to be encoded by a single morphological form or structure, unless the language provides evidence to the contrary" (1984; in Yip, 1994: 132). Such treatment of structural elements will also help learners "to see a particular feature ... not merely as an isolated item but as part of an evolving system of interrelationships which should become increasingly differentiated as it grows" (Stern, 1992: 145).

Regarding the time-effectiveness problem implied in the argument, we need to take into account that teachers can seldom have detailed information about what different

learners in a given group have already dealt with. Consequently, teachers run the risk of presenting the "same grammar" to all or some of the learners in a group irrespective of the lesson format they use.

2. "Preparing the presentation for a single concept or marker sentence is simply too time consuming for busy teachers."

A large part of the presentation stage in a PPP lesson is taken up by "setting the scene" (Rockwell, 1998: 10), that is establishing an appropriate context. Since context is indispensable for grammar teaching (see for example Nunan, 1998: 102-103; Widdowson, 1990: 95) preparation time should be seen as an investment in effective teaching.

I also find odd the mention of "presentation of a ... concept or marker sentence". What is presented is neither the concept, nor the marker sentence itself, but a language item. The sentence is used as data in order to help learners realise when and how a particular language point can be used. The drawback of the typical PPP lesson is that a single marker sentence is not likely to provide learners with enough 'evidence' for them to draw a clear picture of the language item in focus. Longer stretches of discourse containing the target language item can be much more effective.

3. "A successful presentation based on careful elicitation often simply takes up too much lesson time."

The issue of time effectiveness is raised again here. Elicitation is presented as being time consuming, but no alternative is put forward. The only procedure I am aware of that does not need a fair amount of lesson time for the introduction of a new language point is giving learners a decontextualised rule and some example sentences to be imitated in the exercises. But isn't exactly this approach that modern teaching methodology has been trying to move away from? The point is that there seem to be no successful shortcuts in learning/teaching. I don't think, then, that the problem with PPP is the amount of time spent during presentation; if the presentation is "successful", this time is well spent.

4. "The PPP lesson often ignores the sheer volume of material that teachers feel obliged to get through for examination and other purposes."

True, exclusive use of the PPP framework will restrict the scope of the teaching programme, but not because learners will have insufficient opportunities for language practice. The main drawback is that in this way the programme may well be reduced to grammar and vocabulary teaching, neglecting skills development.

## References

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