

# A Focus Group Study on Effective Methods Using the EFL Production Phase

効果的な EFL プロダクション方式のフォーカスグループ調査

スティーヴン・E. クアシャ *Steven E. QUASHA*

## アブストラクト

このフォーカス・グループの調査では、中部地方の大学で外国語（EFL）としての英語を教える4人の非常勤講師及び准教授が、コミュニケーション言語教育に関連して使用される present, practice, produce (PPP) パラダイムの有効性についてインタビューされました。プロダクション段階での適切な時間配分を決定し、またクラス内でより多くのコミュニケーション活動を促進するために、半構造化様式で6つの質問群が使用されました。結果は、EFLの先生方は、よりコントロールされていないプロダクション活動に学生をナビゲートするための質問及び応答と併せて、ロールプレイ、インタビューを好むことを示しました。全体的に、回答者はコントロールされていないコミュニケーション活動がEFL教室時間の約25～30%に使用されるべきであると表明しました。しかしながら、回答者のクラスのいずれかではタスクベースの言語教育が行われているという証拠もあります。このフレームワークは、PPPモデルとは異なるアプローチを採用していますので、時間配分は、クラスの中でタスクを2回実行する学生の能力に合わせて変化するものとなるでしょう。

Key Words : ☐ PPP paradigm ☐ Production Phase  
☐ Uncontrolled Activities ☐ Role-Plays  
☐ Interviews ☐ TBLT

## Introduction

One of the major challenges for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at Japanese universities is getting lower level, or false beginner students to communicate using the target language during class. Far too often, these students revert to their first language to ascertain further information or when they require assistance to complete classroom tasks. Therefore, it is imperative for language teachers to develop and refine communicative tasks and lessons that bolster students' confidence and force them to remain on task using the target language throughout an activity. Unfortunately, as many EFL practitioners will attest to, this is often much easier said than done.

In communicative language teaching (CLT), the triangular paradigm of present, practice and produce/use has served as the de facto standard that helps promote better sequencing and fluency for EFL learners. In this framework, the teacher introduces a topic, theme or language task that represents the top part of the pyramid signifying the present phase. The next activity—or middle part of the pyramid—is to have learners practice the targeted activity with classmates. The practice phase is quite structured since it focuses on repetition through the use of drills. This phase simultaneously helps students develop confidence using the target language while providing educators with an opportunity to correct student errors and recognize potential fluency roadblocks. The final phase of the PPP paradigm is the production or use section that represents the larger base of the triangle. The reason this is the largest part of the PPP triangle is that students are expected to produce or use the acquired language in a longer-timed activity that has some unstructured qualities to simulate more real world English language usage through interaction with classmates.

## **Background**

Seen as a reactionary movement to the outdated grammar-translation method, CLT prevailed as an effective methodology during the 1970's and 1980's. Nunan (1990) summarized five features of CLT that consisted of the following:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning processes itself.
4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Therefore, the aim of CLT was to promote and develop communicative competence in a more authentic context for language learners. Typical classroom activities included pair work and group work that utilized negotiation of meaning. The idea behind this approach is that it mirrored more authentic English students would encounter out in the real world. Also, personalized language learning that focused on the learner's own experiences was usually encouraged. Additionally, fluency-based activities were deemed essential since they helped learners build confidence. Activities such as information gap, interviews, surveys, and role-plays helped promote language learning because they combined controlled with uncontrolled activities as students remained on task using the target language. Perhaps most importantly,

this production or use phase of the PPP paradigm placed students in situations that they could take risks using the target language. The premise behind this approach is that by doing so, it reflects a more authentic learning experience for the second language learner. Moreover, production or use activities personify the language situations that students are likely to encounter when they try to use the L2 outside the classroom.

In recent years, critics of PPP have pointed out several shortcomings regarding its sequencing approach. From the linguistic level, Lewis (1996) stated that PPP is inadequate because it mainly focuses on structures and discrete items. However, Harmer (1996) showed that PPP can also be used for vocabulary and is not solely restricted to so-called forms and discrete items. In his view, PPP can include vocabulary items and should not be viewed as an isolated methodology that is overly dependent on grammatical instruction.

On a psychological level, PPP is aligned with behavioral education and language acquisition (Scrivener, 1994). This linear framework is often criticized for its lack of flexibility and many detractors note that PPP does not reflect the process of real knowledge acquisition (Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1993). As learners we often acquire new knowledge without previous practice, so PPP is not very realistic in this regard. Further, Willis (1990) believes that PPP remains far too aligned with a focus on forms and is quite limiting in the production of a communicative outcome using the target language. Yet, even with these litanies of complaints concerning PPP, Criado (2013) noted that the primary sequencing culprit of PPP is that the practice stage includes too much focus on forms that are often associated with excessive drilling exercises.

However, the PPP usage proposed in this research project instead focuses on students' involvement during the production stage and not on the repetitive drill segment of the practice segment of the triangle. Moreover, it adheres to the PPP approach envisioned by Long and Kurzweil (2002) in which the framework becomes a lens for teachers to plan and analyze lessons. PPP is a tool that provides educators with more options for lesson planning and to better assess students' needs. This incarnation of the PPP framework can be construed as far more liberating than limiting.

## Method

For the purpose of this study, four participants were interviewed and recorded. All are male teachers with more than 10 years experience at the university level in central Japan. One participant is a non-native speaker with a very high level of English competence while the other three hailed from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Three of the participants are part-time teachers with the remaining one employed as a full-time associate professor. To gain a deeper understanding for EFL educators' beliefs regarding CLT, a series of

six semi-structured questions were asked. They appear in order as follows:

1. What represents a communicative English lesson?
2. How do you determine if a communicative lesson went well?
3. Are you familiar with the PPP or PPU paradigm?
4. Do you consciously try to allow time for students to produce or use language during class?
5. If so, how many minutes out of a 90-minute class do you allocate toward the production or use phase?
6. Which activities do you feel foster more fluency in the EFL classroom?

The author of this study served as moderator for the focus group and the interview took approximately nine minutes. None of the participants were aware of the nature of the study prior to the interview and participants did not receive any financial or material reward for engaging in the study. A semi-structured approach was utilized since this allowed participants a chance to expand upon their answers and offer additional insight into ways CLT is used in the EFL classroom.

One far-reaching objective of the study was to determine if any of the interviewers would shirk at the mention of PPP since recent academic inquiry has refuted its benefits. In fact, most EFL/ESL professionals are cognizant that task-based learning teaching (TBLT) has somewhat replaced PPP over the past two decades. Therefore, utilizing a semi-structured interview provided participants with an opportunity to mention either TBLT or another approach as their preferred classroom methodology.

## **Results**

To help delineate answers for each question, respondents' answers were documented using a spreadsheet application. The most common words and phrases given by respondents will be expounded upon to help the reader better grasp the role CLT plays in Japanese university English classes. For the first question, respondents offered a variety of answers. For these teachers, a communicative lesson is designated by students performing in the target language, using role-plays to expand their target language, interacting with classmates and the teacher, along with asking one another questions and answers all contribute toward this aim. For this question, role-play activities was the most often mentioned answer.

The second question asked how to determine if a communicative lesson went well. Here, respondents said that if students are able to accomplish the goal of the lesson, it should be deemed a success. Respondent number two, in particular, mentioned that students should be able to perform a task. In his case, students are informed of the lesson goals, so they know by

the end of class whether or not they have accomplished the goal. Although he did not mention it by name, it was apparent that respondent number two is a proponent of task-based language teaching. Respondent number three—the non-native speaker—stated that a communicative lesson is successful if students do not make the same mistakes as they did at the beginning of class. This response may indicate that the non-native English speaker believes that accuracy is just as important as fluency in L2 learning. The final respondent offered a more humanistic approach with the suggestion to ask students themselves if the lesson went well. While this direct feedback method may seem plausible, the author would voice concern since Japanese learners are quite hesitant offering criticism to their teachers. One possible alternative could be an anonymous ranking system by students using a score range of 1–10 for each activity to determine the efficacy of communicative lessons. This approach would include student involvement while simultaneously avoiding any loss of face.

Question number three was rather straightforward. It asked whether respondents were familiar with the PPP or PPU paradigm. Three of the respondents said yes and respondent number four answered somewhat. However, only respondent number one knew the names of each segment of the PPP triangle and respondent number two replied that he knew two out of the three. It is the author's experience that teachers who have completed a TESOL training course or MA in TESOL are usually well versed in the PPP or PPU paradigm, so this is likely to be the case regarding the participants of this focus group. Two out of the four were likely to possess TESOL certification or advanced degrees.

Question number four asked whether respondents consciously allowed time for students to produce or use language in class. Specifically, this question was trying to uncover whether these teachers utilized uncontrolled language usage in their communicative English classes. All of the respondents replied with an affirmative answer, however respondent number one said that it depends on the goal of the lesson. Upon further inquiry, he said that this may not occur every lesson, but it may take place for longer periods of time in a subsequent lesson. For this educator, his classes likely include a variety of teaching methods.

The next question asked how many minutes out of a 90-minute class do respondents allocate toward the production or use phase. Respondent number one answered that he typically aims for 30 minutes. However, his students are English majors and that may be the reason he can set a longer time allocation. Respondent number two was uncommitted with his response. Rather, he stated that students have to be able to perform the classroom activity or task twice. The time allocation was mute. He was adamant about students being able to perform the task twice. One time is necessary for the teacher to offer feedback to fix errors, so the second time is more representative of the correction phase usually found in TBLT. Respondent number three mentioned that 25–30% would be a suitable goal for production or use activities for students, but this is not always the case. Respondent number four did not

offer up a suggestion for this particular question.

The final question asked which activities foster more fluency in the EFL classroom. Respondent number one mentioned role-play activities. Respondent number two also said role-plays and summaries. Respondent number three offered up student interviews. At this point, respondent number two interjected with advice that interviews should include summaries by students. In other words, students can engage in interviews with their classmates, but they should also be held accountable. This phase could include them reporting back to a partner reviewing or summarizing the interviews they conducted with classmates. Respondent number four also mentioned interviews and role-plays as ideal ways to improve fluency in the EFL classroom.

## **Interpretation**

As referred to in the previous section, some telling answers from respondent number two indicated that he employs TBLT in his teaching repertoire. While none of the teachers in this study were openly critical of PPP or PPU, only respondent number two felt it was irrelevant because he was more focused on students walking out of the classroom with the skills to perform specific tasks. It should also be mentioned that respondent number one seemed unimpressed with the efficacies of PPP. Upon first hearing the acronym, he offered up a subtle look of disapproval. Instead, respondent number one revealed that a variety of language learning methods are more effective for second language acquisition. This answer follows the holistic approach that there is not one best EFL/ESL method. Rather, educators should introduce students to a variety of different methods to help introduce the one that may best suit their specific needs.

Nevertheless, as EFL educators at Japanese universities, one of our primary aims is to promote communicative English. Therefore, most of the respondents felt that aiming for 30 minutes or one-third of class time to uncontrolled language use would be an ideal classroom goal. Granted, with university false beginner students, the distinction between controlled and uncontrolled activities may be more weighted on the former than the latter. Yet, exploring ways to promote more uncontrolled production or use is one area that the respondents of this study are in accord. Encouraging learners to stay on-task in the target language develops confidence and makes for a more enjoyable communicative classroom.

Somewhat surprisingly, an area that was not mentioned by the focus group participants was personalization of language content. For these respondents, it is quite possible that role-play activities include the personalization aspect of language study. In retrospect, this is one point that the author should likely have brought up during the interview. However, since the format was semi-structured, he refrained from imbuing his own agenda onto the study.

None of the participants in this study echoed the previously cited criticism of PPP that included overemphasis on forms or discrete items. We can surmise that respondents in this study feel that PPP is still an amenable CLT method for university classes in Japan. The author's feeling is that the production phase represents an ideal sequencing stage of classroom instruction because it permits students to communicate in the target language for a longer period of time. For lower level students, this is significant because it allows teachers the flexibility to tailor production activities to mesh with student interests and needs. Additionally, PPP is beneficial from a teacher management perspective because it is easily adaptable for larger sized classes.

## Further Inquiry

Since the respondents in this study mentioned role-plays and interviews as viable ways to promote uncontrolled production activities, further research into additional activities that motivate students would be quite advantageous for EFL professionals. Better yet, conducting a student survey on specific activities could offer powerful insight into learner beliefs regarding the efficacy of production activities. Other possible areas of the PPP production cycle that warrant further inquiry include activities that tap into student creativity, create a sense of curiosity about language content, and utilize humor in the L2 classroom. Doing so would help teachers develop a wider variety of production or use activities that engage students in more personal and enjoyable experiences in the L2 classroom.

Additionally, expanding the focus group study to include female educators would certainly help provide more balance to the study. While the second language classroom is often an isolated teaching environment, gaining knowledge from other educators is one area that should be encouraged since it leads to further mutual understanding. In this vein, semi-structured interviews are quite cogent because they can increase dialog among educators and help promote sharing of classroom activities.

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【著者略歴】

Steven E. QUASHA (スティーヴン・E. クアシャ)

1962年 Brookline, MA. U.S.A. 生まれ

所 属・現 職 梶山女学園大学現代マネジメント学部現代マネジメント学科・講師

最終学歴・学位 修士 (Master of Arts) : Asian Students (1994) & Applied Linguistic-TESOL (2007)

所 属 学 会 JALT (全国言語教育学会) Gifu Chapter Program Officer

主 要 著 書 “A Single Step to English Communication” (単著) (2015.3) Gifu, Japan: Akebono Press.

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