Thornbury (1999) Chapter 8: How to integrate grammar

1. What is the PPP model and what are some of its problems?

What Thornbury tries to do in this chapter is to give us some new ideas about how we might go about dealing with grammar within the larger context of a lesson. The first thing he does is introduce the PPP model. The three Ps in the PPP model stand for Presentation, Practice, and finally Production. He also goes to the trouble to explain to us how the production part is actually a rather new aspect of grammar teaching and grammar practice. That is, in the past, teachers really didn’t have their students do a lot of production (or freer practice) in the classroom. Thus, for the most part, grammar instruction consisted of a very large amount of presentation followed by a certain amount of practice, which again was an often vacuous focus on form. Vacuous in that there was no little or no context, no purpose and they were tightly controlled with one ‘correct’ answer.

I think we’re all extremely aware of this basic type of teaching framework. After all, it’s what we were exposed to as students ourselves and is also what we often do today as a result of this early and extensive exposure. After briefly introducing the PPP model, Thornbury then decides, or at least tries to get us to decide, what is actually at fault with this model.

One of the biggest problems with the PPP model is in the ordering of the different stages. SLA research has shown time and time again that a lot of practice, especially decontextualized controlled practice, does not necessarily have an effect on people’s communicative competence or people’s ability to actually use the grammar points that the student becomes so adept at practicing in an unreal, controlled situation. What a range of research from different areas of inquiry has shown is that information is processed and stored in different ways based on how it was experienced. Additionally, reception and production are quite different endeavors which really only approximate each other. Thus, regarding production, learners in the second language, with tenuous systems in the L2 overall, are easily affected (both positively and negatively, it should be noted) by a range of extra-linguistic variables. Following that, it would seem to make sense to actually have the production element before the practice element (As advocated by Willis (2003)), or to simply blur the distinction. It would seem better to simply blend practice and production. Thus, rather than doing a separate (and often never-ending) stage of practice, we can devise a program of production carefully planned for variance across a range of different concerns. These concerns would be topic area, functions, interaction types, modes of expression, degree of control, expected outcomes, among others.

A focus on production can certainly be integrated into everything else that we do, particularly if the teacher gives the students feedback or some sort of reaction to the language that they are producing so that student gets some idea about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in their production. That is key.
2. What is the TTT model and what are some of its advantages?

After criticizing the PPP model, Thornbury then goes on to introduce an alternative model. This alternative model is basically a task-based model. The task-based model has been strongly advocated by David Nunan over the last 15 years. Therefore, it is not a particularly new model, but it has not really yet caught on the way its supporters would have liked, in part because of its vagueness and also due to rather different role of teacher it advocates. Thornbury (1999) seems to think this is because the task-based approach does not focus on or even allow a focus on grammar. This simply is not true. While it is true that a task-based approach may tend to treat grammar more covertly than overtly, it is still possible for a teacher to create tasks with grammar in mind in fact, she must do so based on the claims made in Willis (2003) in relation to teacher planning in the classroom.

The basic idea behind the task-based model is that the students simply engage in a particular type of language practice revolving around a specific task. There my not be any one particular grammar focus in this language practice, or at least there doesn’t have to be, but each part of the task generally requires the use of specific grammatical structures (as grammar is inherent in any kind of language use). This is because tasks are arranged around a specific goal or goals. These might be rather simple goals such as opening a bank account, or they might be more complex and involved as, for example, finding a job or renting an apartment.

Tasks can divided into real world tasks and a pedagogical tasks. While we need the former as a basic means of organizing the whole endeavor we can use the latter to help the students achieve their larger real world tasks. We can and actually need to use one type of task to scaffold the other. The basic idea is that a task from the real world is often quite complicated. It should be broken down into several different subtasks, all of which probably need to be done in specific order in order to move us forward towards the completion of our larger task. An important aspect of this approach is the subtasks which are often more pedagogical and it is for the teacher to decide how many pedagogical tasks she would like to have and how structured she would like them to be. Such decisions are often made with the students in mind. In a carefully constructed task chain the teacher can push the students forward by using the world as an organizing mechanism.

The idea in relation to grammar is that while each task may require the use of certain forms as demanded by the functions of the task the students themselves can and often do pick themselves what they would like to focus on or what they think they need to focus on or what simply comes as their natural focus as they try to successfully complete the task at hand. Constructivist research has shown that people learn what they want to when they want to (when they are ready to do so). It is hard for the teacher to force students to learn and to practice particular things at particular times and the task-based approach agrees with and works within this concept. In the task-based approach the production phase is the phase which comes first, possibly after a brief introduction or warm-up. After that the students might go into some sort of practice phase, wherein they try to fine-tune the particular language that they are focusing on. There is no guarantee, however, that the students are all focusing on the same language forms or grammatical points. For this reason, the seemingly diminished role of the teacher in this type of practice affects many teachers adversely and they have, as a result, avoided using task-based approaches in the classroom. They find it is hard to control what is actually going on and to give students the right type of feedback or correction on what they're doing,
particularly in larger classes where it is hard to keep tabs on all the students all the time.
All the same, however, there are some distinct advantages, as mentioned above, to the
task based approach. What I am trying to draw your attention to, is that there are
alternatives to the PPP model in doing grammar with your students. The basic idea is that
grammar is everywhere. Every time your students do anything with language they are, in
effect, engaging in grammar practice/production.

3. Which of the same lessons did you like the best and which one did you like least? 
  why?
I am a little leery of all of these activities simply because they don’t involve very much
scaffolding. They all expect the students to simply be able to produce language freely
without much help from the teacher. As a result I see them failing miserably in our larger
classes or sometimes rather shy students. I was left with the distinct impression that all of
these lessons would have been much better with supporting HANDOUTS.
The fourth lesson didn’t involve anything. It was simply exposing the students to the
story.
The third lesson was very eclectic to the point where it is hard to tell the difference
between it and the grammar dictation which we discussed earlier. While we said grammar
dictation was a useful kind of activity for students we don’t want to make the mistake of
putting it into a task-based framework. In the second lesson I really do not think the
students will be able to do the listening. Teachers need to scaffold listening and not just
drop this out of a hat

Willis (2003), Chapter 8: Class: The interlevel
This is a pivotal chapter in which Willis summarizes everything he has mentioned to date. As such,
it may, therefore, be appropriate to go through some of the main points of the chapter. So, here
are some quotes.

The whole basis of grammar is that patterns relate to groups or classes of words which share
meanings.
In putting together phrases, clauses and sentences we draw not only on the basic rules governing
clause and phrase structure, but also on the behavior of individual words.
When we learn words we also need to learn about their behavior, their place in the structure and
the way they pattern with other words.

This suggests that clause structure is a product of the choices that are made in terms of words. At
each stage the verb selected constrains the possibilities that follow. It also suggests that we
compose messages in chunks.
So the message unfolds piece by piece rather than word by word.

The important insight of pattern grammar is that the words associated with a particular pattern
can be allocated to groups, or classes, according to their meaning.
The structure of the clause relates to the verb it features, and we can predict that structure by
allocating verbs the classes according to their meaning.
The basic clause structure is determined by verbs and their associated patterns. But many clauses
also features adjuncts or adverbials.
Adverbs can, then, be classified according to the function they fulfill and the usual position in
structure.
The structure of the clause, therefore, depends firstly on the verb and its associated patterns, and secondly on the position of the adverbial in the clause. The position of the adverbial depends on the class of that adverbial, though it may vary according to whether or not the writer wants to place some emphasis on it.

What is happening here is that we are identifying the elements of structure in the noun phrase. Each element constitutes a class of words. For each class we can go on to classify the members. Nouns themselves can be classified according to their behavior. One of the most complex features of the noun phrase is the way in which nouns can be post modified. The rules governing the structure of the noun phrase set out what is possible in the language, the grammar of class helps us to identify what is probable or typical in the language. Any noun can be post modified. Particular nouns are likely to be post modified in particular ways.

At the interlevel the grammar of class spells out the potential of individual words and the way they build up larger units.

The grammar of orientation relays information to the real world. In looking at the relationship between class and orientation we need to look at classes of verb, which use the tense system in particular ways, and at adverbials which help to signal the orientation of the verb phrase.

In a fully developed grammatical system the verb phrase is the primary means of expressing time relationships, but adverbials play an important part too, and it is worth relating particular classes of adverbial to the meanings carried by the verb.

There are things teachers and materials writers can do to help learners realize the potential of classes on verb like these. We can draw attention to them as they occur in text, we can summarize their behavior and use and we can list the most frequently occurring items, those which students are most likely to meet outside the classroom.

The virus, language learning is mainly a matter of learning the meanings and uses of words and phrases. As learners become acquainted with words and phrases, they begin to work with them and allocate them to classes. At the same time, they are gradually building up the ability to deploy these words and phrases in a way which is receiver–friendly. This receiver–friendliness depends firstly on how explicitly the message is related to the outside world by the systems of verb tense and the use of determiners, and secondly on how legalistic items are used to allow the message to develop in a predictable way, generally from given to new.

As lexis is acquired, so is it possible to expose learners to more and more texts, and provide more and more opportunities for exploration.

1. How does verb class affect patterns of a language?

The notion of her class, as discussed in Willis (2003), can best be likened to a particular type of frame. As mentioned above, all lexical units have requirements about what can proceed them or what can follow them. Basically these are requirements about their surrounding conditions. Within this basic phenomenon there are groups of lexical units which share the same requirements. This is what we can call a class of units. It has long
been acknowledged, even within the sphere of generative linguistics, verbs in particular have strong environmental requirements. That is, verbs tend to require certain types of complements. We can think of this first in a very general way by describing three main types of verb classes and these three are part of very traditional approaches to grammar. They are intransitive, transitive and ditransitive verbs. In transitive verbs do not require any type of object/complement following them. Transitive verbs, on the other hand, require a complement or object and ditransitive verbs require to compliments or objects. The utterances below show examples of each.

(30) Let's eat!! Let's eat (ddokboki).
(32) *Mary put. *Mary put it. Mary put it in a box.

A simple note on notations used above:

- The asterix* indicates that an utterance is unacceptable.
- Parentheses around a unit indicate that it is optional and not required.

In addition to these very traditional categories there are other classes of verbs which have been identified by linguists and the most commonly cited of these would be verbs of cognition (go here for an interesting list: http://www.wilmette39.org/DI39/verbs.html). It has been noted that verbs which share a certain semantic field (in this case, cognition or thought) often share structural requirements. Verbs of cognition often require clausal compliments as is shown in the following examples.

(33) [Mary thinks [John is a loser.]]  *Mary thinks John.
(34) [John believes [(that) Mary is a snob.]]  ?John believes it.
(35) [The dog wanted [to devour the bone.]]

Brackets [ ] are used to show clausal boundaries.

These verb classes have a very important effect on the overall structure of language and, although identified previously in traditional models of grammar, are also very good examples of the lexical phrases model discussed in Chapter 7 of Willis (2003).

2. What are the stages in learning with lexical class?
Willis (2003) discusses four basic stages in which students may learn lexical classes.

The first of these is what he calls improvisation. While I agree with the sentiment I’m not sure I like the term itself but what improvisation basically says is that learners start by doing things with language before they really know what they’re doing. As he explains they may put adverts at the end of a verb phrase simply because that is what they heard but don’t actually have specific awareness of what they’re doing or why they’re doing that. It’s simply a matter of repeating to certain extent what you have been exposed to without any actual awareness or belief systems underlying math specific behavior. In this improvisation phase what the learner actually does may also not be very systematic. The patterns they create may vary quite a bit and again they may not be at all aware of the variation within these patterns.

The second stage, that of recognition or what I would rather term awareness comes when the learner begins to not only be aware of what they’re doing but also has some awareness of the underlying system of patterns. At some point they begin to merge what they’re doing with the patterns on the basis of this joint awareness.

The third stage is system building and I think this is actually a good term to use. Once the learner has awareness both of the system and of her own specific behavior in (use of) the
target language she can then start building a system of knowledge which integrates the two and leads to more acceptable usages. They also begin to expand beyond just prototypical uses of certain grammatical forms but also starts to integrate them some other basic patterns of use.

The fourth and final stage, that of exploration, and entails the learner moving out from basic prototypes and trying new structures on the basis of her fairly good knowledge of the system itself. She is able to play with language and explore with different options. This is where we see the learner try a new combinations and altering for effect the pre-existing chunks that she is in her system.

The basic way to get the student to move through these different stages is through a combination of varied and authentic input, awareness building, and use (or in more traditional terms meaningful practice).