

## Revisiting the Four Strands

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### Abstract

The principle of the four strands is a curriculum design principle that says that “A course should include a roughly even balance of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development activities that cover the same language features.” This article looks at the development of the idea of the four strands and its implications for course design. The principle can be used to answer questions such as How should grammar be taught? How much time should be spent on extensive reading? Is it worth including intensive reading in a course?. The major effect of the principle is to stress the importance of learning through language use, along with a smaller amount of deliberate attention to language.

### Keywords

Input, output, fluency, deliberate learning, curriculum design, teaching

## 1 Introduction

The idea of the four strands was developed as an attempt to fit together the diverse areas of research related to foreign language learning. I had read lots of research about language learning and was wondering how to fit it all together in some way. The first article I wrote on the four strands appeared in 1996 and was called “The four strands of a language course”. That article described the four strands and the conditions needed for each strand, and suggested that each strand should get roughly equal time in a course. Nation (2007) covered much the same area but in more detail and with more attention to the conditions for each strand and the research justifying each strand. The conditions were largely inspired by the suggested requirements for comprehensible input and my interest in vocabulary coverage of texts. At the time, I did not realize how the four strands could be used to work out how much time to spend on a particular activity and how to decide what activities to use. Nation and Yamamoto (2012) applied the four strands to self-directed learning, and was based on an assignment done for a course I taught. Nation (2013) developed the idea that the principle of the four strands allowed course designers and teachers to work out how much time should be given to particular activities and the value of weighing one activity against another to decide what should go into a course. In later publications, such as Nation (2017), the principle of the four strands has been slightly modified to say that the strands should all cover the same

language features. This is to ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for repetition. The next step involves working out how the four strands relate to the principles of learning.

## 2 The Principle of the Four Strands

The principle of the four strands is one of the major curriculum design principles (Nation & Macalister (2026). It says, “A course should include a roughly even balance of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development activities that cover the same language features.” This means that around three-quarters of the course time involves language use across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is because the three strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, and fluency development focus on language use at the right level for the learners. One-quarter of the course time involves language-focused learning which involves a deliberate focus on language features. Each strand involves certain conditions that must exist in order for the strand to exist. The conditions for each strand are ranked in order of importance.

The conditions for meaning-focused input are (1) material at the right level (98% coverage of the running words), (2) a focus on comprehension of the message, (3) large quantities of input, and (4) a small number of unfamiliar features to deal with.

The conditions for meaning-focused output are very similar, (1) material at the right level, (2) a focus on comprehensible production of the message, (3) large quantities of output, and (4) a small number of challenging features to deal with.

The conditions for language-focused learning consist of (1) a deliberate focus on language features and strategies for learning, (2) repeated attention to the most useful language features, (3) a focus on accurate learning that will transfer to receptive and productive language use, and (4) the use of processes such as spaced repeated retrieval, variation, and the use of mnemonic devices and metacognitive knowledge. The term *form-focused instruction* is commonly used in second language acquisition research. I deliberately avoided using this term because *form-focused* makes teachers think that it is only about form and not about meaning and use as well. The term *instruction* makes teachers think of teaching, not including learners doing their own deliberate study such as using word cards.

The conditions for fluency development consist of (1) few or no unfamiliar language features (100% vocabulary coverage), (2) pressure to go faster, (3) largely accurate language use, (4) a focus on the message, and (5) large quantities of practice.

These conditions put well established principles of learning into practice.

## 3 The Four Strands and Planning a Course

The idea of having four strands where the proportion of time spent on each strand remains the same as proficiency develops is an arbitrary idea. There is plenty of research to show the value of each strand, and it is possible to fit the findings of research into language acquisition, language learning, and language teaching into the strands. The size of each strand is based on informed judgement rather than particular research findings.

## 4 Four Equal Strands

The principle of the four strands says that equal time should be given to each strand. The time should include time in class and any additional opportunities for learning occurring outside class. The major effect of this division is to limit the amount of deliberate language-focused learning to one-quarter of the course time. In a very large number of language courses, especially where English is a foreign language,

this is much less than the time typically given to language-focused learning. This also should have the effect of reducing the amount of teacher-fronted time in the classroom. Let us now look at each of these two ideas in more detail.

#### **4.1 Learning through language use**

The strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, and fluency development all involve language use. Language use means that the learners are focused on comprehending and producing messages rather than focused on language features. For example, in meaning-focused input through reading, the learners read books that are at the right level for them. In the beginning, elementary and intermediate levels of language learning, this means that the learners need to read vocabulary-controlled graded readers. There are plenty of such readers starting from a vocabulary size of 80 different words going up to the 3,500 word family level and beyond. Similarly, for meaning-focused input through listening, the learners need to work with material at the right level for them, focusing on understanding what they listen to and view. There is a large amount of research on language learning through reading which is usually called extensive reading (Nation & Waring, 2020). Extensive reading usually involves meaning-focused input and fluency development, with fluency development, according to the principle of the four strands, making up about one-third of the time in an extensive reading program. There is now growing interest in extensive listening programs (see [Newton & Nation, 2021](#) Chapter 4; [Renandya & Farrell, 2011](#)). It also makes sense to consider extensive speaking and extensive writing programs. Considering such programs underlines the importance of taking account of the variety of types of speaking and writing. In the case of speaking and listening, this includes monologues, dialogues, group conversation. It includes formal and informal speaking, and interactional and transactional speaking.

Learning through language use requires large quantities of language use because incidental learning involves a weaker focus on language features than deliberate learning.

These four kinds of extensive language use (extensive reading, extensive listening, extensive speaking, and extensive writing) all rely on incidental learning and working with material at the right level for the learners at a series of proficiency levels. Such programs do not involve the teacher fronting the class, but involve the teacher initially organising the program, training the learners to use it, and then monitoring the program.

#### **4.2 Teacher-fronted lessons: The teacher's jobs**

The language-focused learning strand should take up around one-quarter of the course time. If we divide up the teacher's jobs so that teaching is distinguished from other essential teacher work, we can distinguish five jobs ([Nation, 2024](#), Chapter 1). These are listed in order of importance: (1) planning and running a balanced course, (2) organising learning, (3) training the learners, (4) testing and monitoring the learners, and (5) teaching.

Planning and running the course involves applying the principle of the four strands, and applying other course design principles such as making sure that learners are focusing on language features that will give them the greatest benefit for the cost of learning them. Often the course book designer takes on at least part of this role, but course books cannot cover all that needs to be covered in a well-balanced course.

Organising learning involves making sure that learners have access to effective extensive reading, listening, speaking and writing programs, that they have opportunities for group work and individual work, and the classes run smoothly. The difference between the planning and organising jobs is that the planning jobs can be done away from the classroom, but organising includes work in the classroom.

Training the learners involves making sure they know how to learn and how to get the most benefit from the work they do. This can involve training in language learning strategies (see [Nation, 2026](#)). Such training is a part of the language-focused learning strand.

The teacher's fourth most important job is monitoring and assessment. This includes both formative and summative assessment, and includes gathering diagnostic information such as vocabulary size, reading speed, and accuracy in grammatical use. It also includes helping learners keep track of their progress in reading and listening, and providing feedback on spoken and written work.

Teaching is ranked as the least important of the teacher's jobs. Although it is fifth on the list, it is still important. When we look at the four strands, teaching is part of the language-focused learning strand. When we look at the activities within that strand, it is clear that only a part of that strand involves teaching. The language-focused learning strand could involve intensive reading, pronunciation practice, vocabulary teaching, grammar teaching, learning vocabulary and multiword units using flashcards, feedback on writing, strategy training, substitution tables, dictation, and doing course book activities. Some of these involve teacher-fronted work and some do not. If we say that roughly half of the language-focused learning strand involves teacher-fronted work, then that means that around one-eighth of the total course time at the most should involve the teacher being focused on at the front of the class. This is the major reason for placing teaching as the least important of the teacher's jobs – most learning requires the learners to do the work. The second reason is that research shows that teaching is not very effective. Research on vocabulary teaching shows that immediately after the teacher has taught several words, most learners struggle to recall around half of them (Carlo et al, 2004). Learners working with flashcards is much more effective. Most learning does not require teaching, and a lot of teaching produces little learning.

## 5 The Four Strands and Courses with Limited Goals

Some language courses have the goal of developing the learners' proficiency in all four skills. Some have more limited goals, for example, a conversation course, a reading course or a writing course. A reading course, for example, could devote half of the course time to meaning-focused input through reading. That is, there is no meaning-focused output strand and the time that would normally be given to that is given to reading. One-quarter of the course time could be given to reading-related deliberate learning such as intensive reading, learning vocabulary with flashcards, and reading-related strategies such as guessing from context, word parts and dictionary use. One-quarter of the time could be given to reading fluency development such as easy extensive reading and speed reading courses.

Similarly, a conversation course could devote a quarter of the course time to spoken meaning-focused input (listening), and a quarter to spoken meaning-focused output (speaking) with little or no attention to reading and writing. The listening and speaking would not be separate activities because in conversation one person's output is another person's input. One quarter of the course time would be spent on language-focused learning related to conversation focusing on pronunciation, practising conversation strategies such as learning how to maintain a conversation, how to include others in the conversation, how to end a conversation or phone call, and memorizing useful phrases and sentences such as those in the survival vocabulary. One quarter of the course time could focus on spoken fluency development through repeated speaking and listening, easy conversations and fluency development activities such as 4/3/2 and speed controlled listening.

Such courses would work best if they were related to courses in other skills such as writing so that the same language features could be developed across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

How do you teach reading? How do you teach writing? These questions are better expressed as What range of learning opportunities do you need to have to learn how to read? What range of learning

opportunities do you need to have to learn how to write? The simple answer to the questions is “The four strands”. That is, in order to learn to read, you need spend about half your time getting meaning-focused input at the right level for you, that is, reading. You need to spend about a quarter of your time getting fluent at reading by reading easy material and being pushed to read faster. You need to spend about a quarter of your time doing deliberate study related to reading. The same kind of answer applies to learning how to write and learning how to speak and listen. An important message from this is that teaching only plays a small part in learning how to use the language. This small part can be very effective, but it is still only a small part.

These examples show that the principle of the four strands can be applied to all kinds of language courses. The principle of the four strands can also be applied to courses focused on language features, such as a grammar course, a pronunciation course, or a vocabulary development course.

How do you teach grammar? How do you teach spelling? How do you teach pronunciation? Again, the simple answer is “The four strands”. We learn grammar through dealing with grammatical features while listening and reading (meaning-focused input). We also learn grammar through having to produce language while speaking and writing (meaning-focused output). We learn grammar by studying useful grammar rules, by using substitution tables, by getting corrective feedback on speaking and writing, and by puzzling over grammatical features in intensive reading (language-focused learning). We learn grammar by getting fluent at using the grammar we already know (fluency development). These four different kinds of opportunities for learning all work together to contribute to the learning of grammar. The same kind of answer applies to the learning of pronunciation, spelling, word parts, vocabulary, multiword units, textual cohesion, discourse features, and genre features. We learn by a combination of opportunities for learning which involving using language at the limits of our knowledge (meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output), studying language features and strategies, and getting fluent with what we know.

It is interesting to reflect on how widely the principle of the four strands applies beyond language learning. If you want to learn to be a carpenter, you need to work on doing what a carpenter does (meaning-focused output). You need to watch other people (skilled and unskilled) doing what a carpenter does (meaning-focused input). You need to study the theory behind carpentry and building (language-focused learning). You need to get fluent at doing what a carpenter does (fluency development). The same opportunities apply to becoming a good teacher.

The principle of the four strands is based on the idea that we learn through a balanced combination of opportunities for learning. Around three-quarters of these opportunities involve observing, experiencing and doing what we want to learn at various levels of proficiency, and around one-quarter of the opportunities involve studying, reflecting, and being taught.

## **6 The Four Strands and Allocating Time to Each Technique**

The principle of the four strands allocates equal time to each strand. Because each strand involves particular teaching techniques, we can work out what proportion of time each technique would get in that strand, and thus what proportion of time it would get in the whole course. Let us look at some examples to make this clearer.

How much time should be spent doing speed reading courses? Speed reading fits into the fluency development strand. The fluency development strand should take up one-quarter of the course time. Reading fluency development should take up one-quarter on the fluency development strand (the other three quarters involve fluency development for listening, speaking and reading). The whole fluency development strand should take up one-quarter of the total course time, so reading fluency development should take up one-quarter of one-quarter (one-sixteenth) of the course time. Speed reading courses share the reading fluency development time with easy extensive reading. So, the time given to speed reading

courses should be around half or less of the reading fluency development time (around one-thirty-second of the total course time). Although these figures seem precise, they are really just rough estimates, but they are useful rough estimates.

Here is another example. How much time should be spent studying word parts? That is, learning the meaning of twenty or thirty most useful prefixes and suffixes (Nation & Bauer, 2023), and learning to recognize them in words and relate them to the words' meanings. What strand does this activity fit into? Learning word parts involves language-focused learning. What proportion of the strand should involve this activity? If we divide up the language-focused learning strand equally according to the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, then word parts would fit into the one-quarter of that strand given to reading (one-sixteenth of the total course time). Word parts have to share that time with vocabulary learning using flashcards, intensive reading, and reading strategies. So, word parts would take up somewhere around one fortieth of the total course time (around 2%-3%).

Here is one last example. How much time in a course should be spent on an extensive reading program? What strand does this activity fit into? Extensive reading fits into two strands – meaning-focused input and fluency development. What proportion of these strands involves this activity? Extensive reading should take half of the meaning-focused input strand (the other half is for extensive listening). This is one-eighth of the total course time. It should also take one-quarter of the fluency development strand (the other three-quarters are for listening, speaking, and writing fluency). This is one sixteenth of the total course time. So, in all, extensive reading should take up three-sixteenths of the total course time (one-eighth plus one-sixteenth). Around close to 20% of the total course time. Note also that the ratio of meaning-focused input for reading (one-eighth) and fluency development for reading (one-sixteenth) is 2 to 1 (one-eighth to one-sixteenth). That is, one-third of the time on an extensive reading program should be spent on fluency development -- easy extensive reading and speed reading courses.

It is useful to do such calculations on particular techniques and focuses to get a feel for how time should be allocated in a course. Using the four strands as a guide provides a principled way of making such time allocation decisions. We may decide that for good reasons we want to give more time to a particular activity. Considering the four strands helps make us aware that by giving more time to a particular activity, we are taking time away from other opportunities for learning.

## 7 The Four Strands and the Activities that Represent Them

We have seen that the principle of the four strands can be used to decide how much time to spend on an activity. It can also be used as a way of deciding which activities to use. For example, is it worth doing blank-filling exercises with a focus on grammar? Blank-filling exercises fit into the language-focused learning strand. In this strand, as in all the strands, time is limited and blank-filling exercises need to compete with other language-focused learning, grammar-focused activities for time. These activities include substitution tables, feedback on writing, dictation, memorizing phrases and sentences, and learning grammar rules. The course-designer, teacher or learner needs to consider if blank-filling will meet their grammar-learning goal more efficiently and effectively than any other one of these and then decide what to include in the course. I would not include blank-filling activities (Webb, Uchiyara & Yanagisawa, 2020).

A simple way to approach language curriculum design is to accept the principle of the four strands and the frequency principle (focus on the most frequent vocabulary and language features), and then to use available resources to meet the requirements of each strand. The techniques used in the three message focused strands – meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, and fluency development – are largely determined, as there is not much choice available when focusing on language use -- extensive reading, extensive listening, extensive speaking across a variety of genres, and extensive writing across a range of relevant genres. The fluency development strand can simply involve easy tasks and repeated

tasks, as well as a small number of specific fluency focused activities, namely speed controlled listening, 4/3/2, speed reading and 10 minute writing.

The language-focused learning strand has more options for choice. Learning vocabulary, multiword units, phrases, and sentences using bilingual flash cards is so efficient and effective that it deserves to be an option in most courses. When considering other deliberate learning activities, it is worth considering if the job could be better done using flash cards. Training in how to learn is so widely effective, including beyond the language course, that it deserves the small amount of time it takes. Other useful techniques include intensive reading, substitution tables, learning word parts, hearing and pronunciation practice, spelling, and feedback on writing and speaking. There is some research which helps in the choice, such as the research on flash card use and feedback on writing, but language-focused learning activities are largely under-researched. The teacher or course-designer needs to use their own experience and judgement when deciding what to include and not include. Nation (2025) *The Twenty Most Effective Language Teaching Techniques* contains my choices and the reasons for them.

We have now seen the role that the principle of the four strands can play in allocating time to particular techniques and activities and in deciding what techniques to use. In the following section, we will look at how the principle can be used to choose a course book and to supplement a course book.

## 8 The Four Strands and Course Books

A course book cannot include all the material that is needed to cover the four strands of a course. The most obvious examples of this are in the meaning-focused input strand. A course book cannot include the amount of material at the right level for the range of learners in a class for them to do sufficient amounts of extensive listening and extensive reading. Similarly, a course book would be struggling to include sufficient speed reading practice at the right level for the range of proficiency levels in a class.

A lot of the work in a course book involves studying the language, but in a good course book up to half of the material can involve language use. If the course book contains most of the material for study and teaching (language-focused learning), then about half of the class time should involve the course book and the other half should involve other material such as graded readers, extensive listening material and opportunities for communicative speaking and writing.

A large amount of the material which should be in a course but which is not in the course book could not easily be part of a typical course book. Extensive reading, which should make up half of the meaning-focused input part of course, could not be included in a course book because there would be too much material. Learners at a low proficiency level should be reading at least 100,000 to 200,000 running words per year. In addition, the material would need to be at the right level for each learner, meaning that even in a relatively homogeneous class, there would need to be several different levels of material. The same two problems apply to material for extensive listening and reading fluency material.

Some material which is missing from current course books could be easily be included in course books. This includes opportunities for extensive speaking and writing, material aimed at developing learner autonomy, fluency development activities for the listening, speaking and writing skills, and material aimed at increasing the opportunities for repeated encounters with the same material and language features.

## 9 The Four Strands and Planning a Week's Lessons

In the preceding sections we looked at allocating time to various opportunities for learning across a whole course. A common question asked about the four strands is "Should each lesson contain a balance of the four strands?" The short answer to this is no. The principle of the four strands applies to opportunities

for learning across a course of several months or a year, largely because it takes a long time to learn a language. It is possible to plan lessons covering a week using the four strands, but this is probably the shortest period of time for such planning, and a month would make planning more comfortable.

The principle of the four strands is a useful way of making sure that learners experience a suitable range of opportunities for learning. In this article we have looked at the effect of the principle on deciding what activities are included in a course and how much time to spend on them.

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