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APPLYING THE FOUR STRANDS TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The principle of the four strands says that a well balanced language course should have four equal strands of meaning focused input, meaning focused output, language focused learning, and fluency development. By applying this principle, it is possible to answer questions like How can I teach vocabulary? What should a well balanced listening course contain? How much extensive reading should we do? Is it worthwhile doing grammar translation? and How can I find out if I have a well balanced conversation course? The article describes the rationale behind such answers. The four strands principle is primarily a way of providing a balance of learning opportunities, and the article shows how this can be done in self regulated foreign language learning without a teacher.

Keywords: Fluency learning, four strands, language focused learning, meaning focused input, meaning focused output.

INTRODUCTION

The principle of the four strands (Nation, 2007) states that a well balanced language course should consist of four equal strands – meaning focused input, meaning focused output, language focused learning, and fluency development. Each strand should receive a roughly equal amount of time in a course.

The meaning focused input strand involves learning through listening and reading. This is largely incidental learning because the learners' attention should be focused on comprehending what is being read or listened to. The meaning focused output strand involves learning through speaking and writing and in common with the meaning focused input strand involves largely incidental learning. The language focused learning strand involves deliberate attention to language features, including spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, multiword units, grammar, and discourse. In second language acquisition research, the strand is often referred to as form focused instruction, but this terminology is a little misleading as it not only focuses

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on form but also on meaning and use, and it need not be instruction but may be learning initiated by language learners. The fourth strand of a well balanced course is a fluency development strand, which aims at helping the learners make the best use of what is already known. The definition of fluency used in the fluency development strand simply relates to being able to receive and produce language at a reasonable rate. Like the meaning focused input and meaning focused output strands of a course, the fluency development strand is also strongly message focused. Thus, the four strands consist of three message focused or communicative strands, and one language focused strand.

Nation (2007) presents some of the evidence supporting the idea of the strands. Nation and Newton (2009) and Nation (2009) show how the strands can be applied to the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Perhaps, the major principle supporting the idea of the four strands is the time-on-task principle. The time-on-task principle says that the more time you spend doing something, the better you will be at doing it. So, if you wish to learn to write, you should do lots of writing. If you wish to read well, you should do lots of reading. The time-on-task principle is a somewhat crude quantity based principle, but there is plenty of evidence that it works. The three message focused strands put this principle into practice.

The purpose of the present article is to show how the principle of the four strands can be applied. The effect of applying this principle is to show that it makes more sense to have a range of ways of helping the learning of certain language features and skills than to rely on only one way. Let us look briefly at the learning of collocations to illustrate this point. “How should collocations be taught?” This is not a good question because it assumes that teaching is the only way to deal with collocations. A better version of the question would be “How should collocations be learnt?” If we apply the four strands principle to the learning of collocations, we need to answer the following questions.

1. How can collocations be learned through meaning focused input?
2. How can collocations be learned through meaning focused output?
3. What language focused learning activities are most suitable for the learning of collocations?
4. How can fluency development help the learning of collocations?

There is research evidence (Kurnia, 2003) that collocations can be picked up incidentally through reading. We should, thus, expect that the extensive reading course and the opportunities for reading and listening in the classroom will make a contribution to the learning of collocations. Similarly, we can expect that speaking and writing activities will contribute to the productive learning of collocations. It may be that one of the greatest contributions to the learning of collocations will come through the fluency development strand of a course. This is because when fluency develops, the size of the language unit that learners work with changes. Thus, when learners become more fluent at reading, they move from reading at the word level to making use of phrasal knowledge while reading. The fluency development strand of a course needs to focus separately on fluency in listening, fluency in speaking, fluency in reading, and fluency in writing. Thus, the fluency development strand of a course can develop both receptive and productive knowledge of collocations. Because fluency development involves dealing with large quantities of material, this can help to provide the amount of repetition needed to support such learning.

The deliberate learning of collocations should not make up more than one quarter of the time assigned to the learning of collocations. There are numerous activities that have been suggested for learning collocations (Brown, 1974; Lewis, 2000), and there is also the possibility of using word cards (Steinel, Hulstijn, and Steinel, 2007) for such learning. Because there are many possibilities, it is important to critically assess the effectiveness of these different deliberate activities so that the most effective ones are used. When comparing learning activities, it is much more important to compare the effectiveness of activities within a strand than to compare activities between strands. Activities within a strand compete with each other for time in a course. Comparing a meaning focused input activity with a language focused learning activity may have some usefulness for comparing quantities of learning, but generally trying to see whether a meaning focused input activity, for example, works better than a particular language focused learning activity is not a very useful comparison because both meaning focused input activities and language focused learning activities are necessary within a well balanced program.

APPLYING FOUR STRANDS

The four strands principle can be a useful basis for answering questions, including:

1. How can I teach vocabulary? (We could replace *vocabulary* in that question with *pronunciation, grammar, listening, speaking, reading,* or *writing*). The question is better phrased as "How can I help the learning of vocabulary?"
2. What should a well balanced listening course contain? (We could replace *listening* in that question with *speaking, reading, writing, extensive reading, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation,* or *spelling*)
3. How much extensive reading should we do? (We could replace *extensive reading* in that question with *grammar teaching, spelling practice, work on vocabulary strategies*, for example)
4. Is it worthwhile doing grammar translation? (We could replace *grammar translation* in that question with *reading aloud, rote learning of vocabulary,* or *dictogloss*, for example)
5. How can I find out if I have a well balanced conversation course?

When we looked at collocation earlier in this article, we answered the question which is similar to number 1 in the above list. In general, the way to answer such a question is to look at the role of each of the four strands in the learning of that particular aspect of language or language use. Let us now look at the other four questions to see how the principle of the four strands can guide the answers to such questions. After looking at these questions, we will look at how the principle of the four strands can guide an individual learner learning a language without a teacher.

What Should a Well Balanced Listening Course Contain?

When answering such a question, we need to consider what other opportunities for language learning the learners have. Typically, a listening course is part of a program that

provides opportunities for practicing the other skills as well as providing opportunities for the deliberate learning of language items. Clearly, the meaning focused input strand is going to be very important in a listening course and should probably make up at least 50% of the time given to the listening course because listening involves meaning focused input. However, we also need to consider what role reading input might play in a listening course. This reading input could be part of the listening course, for example, reading while listening and reading summaries of material before listening to it. The reading input, however, could also be outside the listening course and could be a result of relating the listening activities to work that is going on in the reading course or in other parts of the language program.

Listening fluency development should make up about one quarter of the listening course time, and could involve easy extensive listening, speeded listening using a digital tape recorder, or listening to very familiar material. The language focused learning strand of a listening course could involve activities such as dictation, the study of discourse features common in spoken material, or spoken phrase recognition activities. The language focused learning strand should make up about 25% of the listening course time. Meaning focused output also has a role to play in the listening course because a substantial amount of input that the learners get in such a course can come from their classmates. This is best calculated within the 50% of a course devoted to meaning focused input. Table 1 presents the strands of a listening course in the form of a table.

Meaning focused input (50%) This can include some reading and some meaning focused output
Language focused learning (25%)
Fluency development (25%

Table 1. The Strands of a Well Balanced Listening Course.

How much Extensive Reading Should We Do?

When looking at the design of the listening course when answering the previous question, we tried to work out the proportions of each strand within that particular course. It is possible to do the same kind of calculation with a particular activity. The most important initial question when doing this is to work out what strand that activity fits into. As we shall see with extensive reading, an activity may fit into more than one strand. There should be two major strands in an extensive reading course – the meaning focused input strand where learners read at a roughly 98% coverage level so that that there is some new vocabulary to learn, and the fluency development strand where learners read material containing little or no unfamiliar vocabulary and read it quickly.

In the meaning focused input strand of a course, extensive reading has to share the time with meaning focused listening, and other reading activities that are not a part of extensive reading. Very roughly, this would mean that extensive reading as part of the meaning focused input strand would make up a little under one eighth of the total course time. In the fluency development strand of a course, reading fluency development should make up one quarter of that strand. However, extensive reading for fluency development has to share that time with the learners working through a speed reading course, repeated reading, and perhaps skimming

and scanning activities. Ideally, extensive reading for fluency development would make up well over half of the reading fluency development time, giving it around one sixteenth of the total course time. Language focused learning and meaning focused output have a role to play in extensive reading. In the language focused learning strand of an extensive reading course, we might expect to see activities designed to motivate the learners, to train them in selecting texts to read and in recording their reading, and to link the extensive reading with other parts of the language course. In the meaning focused output strand of an extensive reading course, we could expect to see learners talking and writing about what they have read. This meaning focused output activity, however, might not be calculated as part of the extensive reading program. In total, extensive reading could make up somewhere just under one quarter of the total course time.

In Table 2, the total proportion of time given to extensive reading is 7/32s of the course time. This is approaching one quarter of the course time, but it must be remembered that a reasonable proportion of this time would be spent on reading outside of class. It is possible to do this kind of calculation for other activities although it is likely that extensive reading is the activity which would receive the second greatest amount of time in a course after spoken communicative activities.

Meaning focused input Reading would make up half of the meaning focused input time, and extensive reading would make up a large proportion of that half, which would be just under one eighth of the total course time.	1/8
Meaning focused output Learners should talk and write about what they have read, but this might not be counted as part of the extensive reading program.	0
Language focused learning This should occupy only a small amount of the time in an extensive reading program, but it is important as a way of motivating learners to read and in organizing and running the extensive reading program.	1/32
Fluency development Fluency development in reading should make up one quarter of a fluency development program, and a good proportion of this should be easy extensive reading.	Less than 1/16
Total proportion of the course given to extensive reading	*7/32*

Table 2. The Time Devoted to Extensive Reading across the Four Strands of a Course.

Is It Worthwhile Doing Grammar Translation?

In answering the previous question about extensive reading, we assumed that the activity was worth doing. There is plenty of research evidence to show the value of extensive reading. However, there are many language learning activities that might not be worth doing. Grammar translation is one that comes in for a lot of criticism. If we apply the principle of the four strands to evaluating the worth of an activity, we need to work out what strand that activity fits into and what other activities it is competing with for time within this strand.

Grammar translation is clearly part of the language focused learning strand. Although it involves the reading of a text, the main focus is on the language items within the text and the amount of true reading involved is rather minimal. However, this is not to say that it is a worthless activity, but simply that it fits into the language focused learning strand. We, now, need to work out what other activities would be done if we did not do grammar translation. To work this out, we need to decide on the learning goals of grammar translation and to see what other activities would reach the same learning goals. As a result of a grammar translation activity, we would expect learners to learn new vocabulary, to gain an understanding of some of the grammatical aspects of a text, and to see how the sentences of the text fit together to convey a message. It is likely in such an activity that these goals will be largely achieved because there is a deliberate focus on the items to be learned. Because the focus is largely done through the learners' first language, the teaching is likely to be well understood. Grammar translation may, thus, be preferred over some other language focused learning activities like blank filling, sentence manipulation activities, or dictogloss.

How Can I Find out if I Have Got a Well Balanced Conversation Course?

The principle of the four strands primarily involves making sure that there is a balance of learning opportunities in a language course. The most direct way of making sure if a course provides a balance of opportunities is to keep a record of the activities done over a reasonable period of time, such as a week in a full time course or a month or two in a part time course. The amount of time spent on each activity needs to be noted. Then, each activity should be classified into the appropriate strand and the time added up to see if there is a roughly equal balance of time for the four strands. The slight complication with this in a conversation course is that while some learners are speaking, others are listening. In other words, while some are involved in meaning focused output, others are involved in meaning focused input.

A faster and slightly less reliable and valid way is simply to reflect on previous lessons or to classify the material in the course book to see if there is a balance of the four strands. When looking to see if there is a balance of opportunities for learning, it is necessary to take the widest possible view of the course. This includes looking at what happens during class time and the opportunities for learning outside of class time both through homework and through the normal activities of daily life. The strands of meaning focused input and meaning focused output, and to some degree, the strand of fluency development, can result in a wide range of different kinds of knowledge through incidental learning. Thus, the most important application of the principle of the four strands is across the course as a whole, rather than in one particular section of the course.

In a particular section of the wider course, such as the part focusing on conversation, it is important that the time-on-task principle is applied. That is, a conversation course should involve a lot of conversation just as a reading course should involve a lot of reading, and a writing course should involve a lot of writing. Thus, in a conversation course around 50% of the time should involve speaking as meaning focused output (which also necessarily includes meaning focused input for the listeners), and another 25% should involve speaking fluency activities.

It is also important that the different parts of a course take account of each other, particularly in ensuring a balance of activities across the four strands over the whole course,

but in also making sure that meaning focused input, for example, in one part is also achieving learning goals and providing preparation that will be very useful in another part of the course. For example, in a conversation course, speaking activities can be designed so that they provide favorable opportunities for vocabulary learning (Joe, 1998; Joe, Nation, and Newton, 1996). This vocabulary learning can, then, be reinforced by deliberate learning and reading in other parts of the course.

APPLYING THE FOUR STRANDS TO AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

So far, we have looked at the application of the four strands principle in courses involving teachers. The four strands principle can also usefully be applied when learners take control of their own learning and decide to learn a language without the help of a teacher. The following example describes the way that the four strands principle was applied when the second author of this article decided to learn Spanish. The choice of the activities was done with the principle of the four strands in mind. Table 3 is a list of the activities used that have been classified into the four strands. Note that a few activities appear in more than one strand. This is because the activity can provide opportunities for both meaning focused input and meaning focused output because it involves interaction, and because an activity done under different conditions can fit into a different strand of a course. The most common example of this is where a meaning focused input or a meaning focused output activity is now so familiar that it provides an opportunity for fluency development. In Table 3, this happens with the activity of exchanging emails with language exchange partners.

Strands	Activities
Meaning focused Input	Reading graded readers containing some unfamiliar words Listening to a recorded story Listening to lessons on podcasts Exchanging emails with language exchange partners Browsing the Internet in the target language
Meaning focused Output	Keeping a diary and doing free writing Exchanging emails with language exchange partners
Language focused Learning	Learning from a language textbook Using a grammar reference book Consulting a dictionary Consulting a phrase book Studying using a workbook Doing dictation of a recorded story or a movie scene Memorizing words using word cards Using iPhone applications for pronunciation
Fluency Development	Speaking and writing using a phrase book Doing repetitive exercises in a workbook Reading an easy graded reader Listening to a recorded story Shadowing or repeating a recorded story or a movie

	scene Keeping a diary or doing free writing Watching familiar movies Browsing websites in the target language Looking at online video sharing websites Exchanging emails with language exchange partners

Table 3. Applying the Four Strands to Autonomous Learning.

Let us look briefly at some of these activities, this time organized under the kinds of resources drawn on. These include books, cards and notebooks, technology, movies and TV series, songs, and the internet. The thinking behind the choices is described in the first person to most readily reflect what happened.

Books

At first, I considered using a language textbook but did not see the necessity of following the sequence of units and activities in the course although for many learners this may be an attractive feature. Instead, I used a grammar reference book to deal with grammatical points, which were difficult to understand, a bilingual dictionary (which also helped to some degree with the grammar), and a phrase book that allowed me to make a very early start on speaking and writing. I could not find any graded readers in Spanish and ended up buying a book called *Easy Spanish Reader* (Tardy, 2004). The book came with a CD, which was useful to practice listening, dictation, and shadowing. Another possibility would be to use children's books, and while these are typically much easier than books written for adults, they bring their own difficulties with them such as the need to learn the vocabulary of fairy tales. Learners of Spanish have a much much smaller range of written resources available to them than learners of English, but there are greater resources for Spanish than there are for less commonly learned languages.

Cards and Notebooks

Learning words and phrases on word cards is often frowned upon by teachers but is extremely effective (Elgort, 2011; Nation, 2001, pp. 296-316). Learning from word cards can also contribute to fluency development, particularly when the cards contain phrases and they are gone through quickly. Because of the lack of opportunities to produce the target language, I tried keeping a diary and doing free writing.

Technologies

Having an iPhone helped my learning of Spanish. There are various applications in the Apple Store that can be downloaded free. For example, “eFlash Spanish” (http://eflashapps.com/eflash-spanish.html) provides words (numbers, letters, animals, colors, furniture, body parts and musical instruments) with pictures and sounds. Although introducing related words together can be confusing, this application helped me to become familiar with quite a lot of new words. Another useful application I used was “iTranslate”

(http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/itranslate-free-translator/id288113403?mt=8) where the learner can choose from which language and to which language they want to translate. Although it is a computerized translation application and is not always accurate, it was useful in checking the basic idea of some input when I had difficulties understanding. There are flash card programs (Nakata, 2011), which are well designed to help the learning and revision of vocabulary.

There are also digital media files, *podcasts***,** which are available for language learning, including audio and video podcasts. For Spanish, I found a video podcast called "Lingus.TV; learn Spanish watching TV" (http://www.lingus.tv/videos). Each podcast is approximately two minutes long with Spanish captions. A new episode is released every week, and is graded from beginner to advanced. Each podcast has its own website where the transcription of the skit, and the translation of the skit into English can be downloaded. In addition, each skit includes a lesson, which focuses on a few grammatical features or commonly used phrases. These podcasts are well worth using for meaning focused input, language focused learning and fluency development. Other podcasts that simply contain the news or stories in the target language turned out to be too difficult at my elementary stage.

Movies and TV Series

Movies need to be chosen carefully so that the language spoken by the characters matches the needs of the learner and the complexity of the language, and the vocabulary is at a suitable level (Webb and Rodgers, 2009). Since I did not own any Spanish speaking movies, I decided to try with an English movie *Free Willy* (Wincer, 1993), which was on a DVD that included both Spanish subtitles and dubbed Spanish audio settings. I had seen the movie many times before, and I had a clear idea of what was happening in the movie. First, I watched it dubbed in Spanish. To my surprise, I caught some phrases after only four days of studying Spanish such as "Disculpe (excuse me)," "Muchas gracias (thank you very much)," "¡Ahora! (Now!)," "Puedo (I can)," "Sí, sí, por favor (yes, yes, please)." These phrases were previously learned from various sources such as the phrase book or messaging with my language exchange partners. If the learner can find scenes with such basic phrases, movies can be an effective opportunity to see how learned language items are used in communication.

Secondly, I watched another scene in dubbed Spanish with the Spanish subtitles on. Although the subtitle is often shorter than the spoken language, the main idea is usually spelled out. I found it helpful to have the subtitles to check what was heard. In the first try with only the Spanish audio on, I caught some phrases, but in the second run through with subtitles as well, I noticed sentences such as "No soy tu hijo (I am not your son)," "¿Puedes saludar? (Can you say hello?)." I understood the sentences based on the vocabulary previously learned. In this respect, I tended to look at the subtitles and ignore the sounds, so the subtitles distracted me from the listening practice, but was certainly effective for meeting newly learned phrases and words in context.

Lastly, I watched a few scenes with English dialog and Spanish subtitles. It was the easiest of the three tries because I only focused on the written subtitles while the English audio naturally floated into my ears. Like the second try, though not listening practice, it was useful to see how the words and phrase are used.

I started watching a Mexican TV series. This provided a lot of repetition. Commonly used words and phrases could be understood based on the context cues after several encounters. I found that using a dictionary while watching was helpful. I found that I had to persist with watching the TV series to make it a worthwhile learning activity.

Songs

Like movies, the choice of the song was the key to good language learning. One of my language exchange partners recommended some songs popular in Latin America, and she mentioned that they were easy for beginners. However, when I looked at the lyrics, I only understood a few words. By saying "easy," she seemed to mean the speed of the songs was slow. Mastering these songs may be well worth it for pronunciation practice. On the other hand, practicing "meaningless" songs does not concentrate on the message which is the main focus of three strands. Browsing through an online video sharing website, I came across a song where the chorus consisted of familiar words. The song had verb conjugation patterns I previously learned in the workbook. For example, "quiero (I want)," and "quires (you want)."

The Internet

There are various ways to take advantage of the internet. First, there are many language teaching websites. By simply typing in the search engine "How old are you? Spanish," for example, learners can be directed to the translation.

Browsing websites in the target language can be a part of fluency development. When I was studying English using the TV series *Full House*, I often searched for web pages about the actors and actresses. It was enjoyable and furthermore I learned new vocabulary using context (particularly the layout of the webpage or the pictures) such as "enter," "enlarge (the pictures)," "biography," or "quit." The video sharing website *YouTube* has video clips with the potential to be language learning materials. The clips are posted from all over the world, and there were many clips where the Mexican actors I knew were interviewed; however, they were too difficult for me. I found clips of a popular children's cartoon from Spain. Each episode is approximately six minutes long and the ones uploaded on *YouTube* had Spanish captions with an English translation underneath. The storyline and the animation were enjoyable while the dialog was simple and mostly in the present tense. These short clips can be easily watched repeatedly, and the captions can also be used in dictation, or searching for unknown words. Each clip on *YouTube* has comments from the viewers. The comments are often simple and related to the clip, so the comments provide interesting meaning focused input as well (The English learning website, English Central [http://www.englishcentral.com/], has tremendous facilities for using such short clips for learning English).

The three options described above take advantage of the Internet for gathering a wide variety of information. The Internet is also a place to connect with people from all over the world. Having language exchange partners on the Internet has been one of the best ways to learn Spanish so far. Even though I had been using social network websites to keep in touch with my friends overseas, I had never talked to somebody I had not met face-to-face. When I started studying Spanish, I thought having language exchange partners could be one way to

compensate for the lack of contact with Spanish speaking people in my environment. I listed my nickname, and I am a native speaker of Japanese learning Spanish on one of the language exchange websites. I received many messages from native speakers of Spanish, from the United States, Mexico, Spain, Chile, Brazil, Peru, and Japan. There are six people who I keep in touch with regularly. Exchanging emails creates many opportunities for language learning.

One thing that stands out for me is hypothesis testing function of output as described in Swain's (2005) output hypothesis. The hypothesis testing function emphasizes the importance of interaction for language learning as the learner checks or modifies their output based on the feedback of the interlocutor. I frequently wrote sentences relying on my limited knowledge of Spanish and decided if the sentences were correct or not based on the response I received. For example, after guessing that "qué (what),""te gusta (you like)," and "hacer (to do –base form)," would make the sentence "¿Qué te gusta hacer?" thinking it would mean "what do you like to do?" The response I got was "Me gusta (I like) correr (to run –base form)." This assured me that the question I composed was correct, and I also understood that it is grammatical to put the verb base form after "te gusta (you like)."

Secondly, exchanging emails creates opportunities for focus on form. According to Long (1997), focus on form "involves briefly drawing students' attention to linguistic elements (words, collocations, grammatical structures, pragmatic patterns), in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication" (Long, 1997, para. # 1). When I wrote or read emails, I often stopped and looked up a word or grammar point, shifting the focus from the message to the language item. The written form of the email makes it easy to do so.

Exchanging emails fits into the meaning focused input and meaning focused output strands. The main goal is to convey and receive messages. The content of the emails was usually about daily life, and when writing emails, I could choose the topic to write about. In addition, the language exchange partner's previous email was a source of language items when writing the response. For example, "¿Conoces a Def Tech? (Do you know Def Tech?)" was composed based on a message I previously received saying "¿Conoces a Los Kalibres? (Do you know Los Kalibres?)." By adapting the phrases used by my language partner, I could make up for what I did not know.

Lastly, I also realized that having more than one language exchange partner can set up the conditions for fluency development. In the beginning, for example, I introduced myself many times to different partners and within no time, I was able to write about myself in a fluent way.

Having language exchange partners is indeed a great way to use the target language; however, there are two drawbacks. Firstly, it is difficult to find the "right" language exchange partners. Even though I received many messages, the number of the exchangers decreased after messaging each other several times. Some people simply wanted to meet somebody of the opposite sex. Others write "incorrectly" without punctuation and with a lot of slang, which made it hard to understand especially for a beginner like myself. There were also people who switched to English after finding how poor my Spanish was, which lost the point of having a language exchange partner. Secondly, exchanging emails is never the same as talking to people in the target language. There are some who suggested contacting each other through video chat online, for example through Skype, but I cannot bring myself to do video chatting with somebody I do not know in real life. Nevertheless, language exchange is one of

the ways to use the language in an environment without people who speak the target language.

The above example shows that the four strands can act as a useful guideline by an autonomous learner when deciding what kinds of activities to include in a program of study in order to learn a language without the help of a teacher. An important prerequisite for this, however, is not just understanding the need for balance in the program, but also understanding the conditions that need to occur in order for a strand to exist. Input, for example, is not meaning focused input if it is too difficult or far too easy for the learner.

IMPLICATIONS AND ISSUES

The four strands principle has several important implications for course design and pedagogy. Firstly, it sees the teacher's most important role as being a planner not a teacher. This planning role involves deciding what are the most important language items for the learner to be focusing on at a particular stage, and providing a range of learning opportunities across the four strands so that this material will be learned. This planning role relates to the second most important implication, namely that teaching should play a rather reduced role in a language program. By *teaching*, we mean the direct presentation and explanation of language features. Typically, this involves the teaching of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, collocations, grammatical features and patterns, and discourse features. There is quite a lot of evidence to show that direct teaching is not greatly effective. For instance, the research carried out on the involvement load hypothesis (Folse, 2006; Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001; Keating, 2008) shows that learners typically retain around 30 to 40% of the words that they meet in a direct teaching activity when retention is measured using an immediate test of receptive knowledge. We can view such a percentage either positively or negatively. Viewed positively, it is better than nothing. Viewed negatively, over half of the words in the activity on average were not learned. This is not to say that we should not use such activities, but that we should see them only as a part of one of the four strands of a well balanced course, and may not want to give them as much time as the more effective deliberate learning from word cards.

It may seem that the role of the teacher is much more demanding in the strand of language focused learning than in the three remaining meaning focused strands. However, the teacher has important things to do in the strands. These involve the following:

1. Making sure that the meaning focused strands truly exist in the course by ensuring that the input and output is at the right level for the student.
2. Setting up the important conditions of repetition, retrieval, creative use, and dual coding through the choice and design of the tasks (See Joe, Nation, and Newton, 1996; Nation, 2008, pp. 41-56) for detailed advice and examples of how to do this).
3. Making sure that the meaning focused strands are given appropriate amounts of time in the course.

The teacher's role is not so obvious in the meaning focused strands because the learning involved is largely incidental to the meaning focused nature of the tasks. Let us look briefly at some examples of setting up the conditions for the meaning focused strands.

Repetition	To encourage repetition the teacher can design linked skill activities where the same content is dealt with in three different ways, for example, read about it, talk about it, and write about. Tasks may also be repeated or involve reprocessing the same material as in pyramid activities (Jordan, 1990) and the expert groups/family groups procedure.
Retrieval	Retrieval involves having to recall previously met language features. Tasks involving several steps, like linked skills tasks and procedures, can be designed so that the later steps are done with a reliance on retrieval. Information transfer activities (Palmer, 1982) can be designed so that retrieval is necessary.
Creative use	Creative use involves meeting or producing language features in ways in which they have not been met before. Graded readers typically involve the use of new vocabulary at a particular level reoccurring in varied contexts. Activities which include role play, retelling for a different purpose, reporting back, and linked skill activities involving time delay are likely to include creative use.
Dual coding	Dual coding (Paivio, 1986) involves processing items both pictorially and linguistically. Information transfer activities are ideal for this. Drama activities, projects, and film and movie activities are also likely to result in dual coding.

Table 4. Examples of Setting up the Conditions for the Meaning Focused Strands.

Thus, the teacher's role in the meaning focused strands is largely one of planning and design.

Another implication of the four strands principle is that simplified and graded material is essential for language learning if learners are to experience meaning focused input and receptive fluency development from the early stages of language learning. Learners of English as a foreign or second language have a marvelous resource of thousands of graded readers written within various vocabulary levels to help their learning. These readers are ideal sources of meaning focused input and fluency development. Teachers need to overcome any prejudices they feel against controlled language material and make use of this rich resource.

The principle of the four strands also has implications for research. When comparing the effectiveness of activities for language learning, the most important comparisons are between activities which fit into the same strand of a course. These activities are truly in competition with each other because they compete for the limited amount of time available in each strand. Comparison of activities from different strands is not such a useful comparison because all four strands need to exist within a well balanced course. Thus, comparing guessing from context with looking up a word in the dictionary is in effect comparing learning from meaning focused input with language focused learning. A much more interesting comparison would be comparing hardcopy dictionary lookup with consulting an electronic dictionary.

The four strands principle is not just a principle for teachers and course designers. Autonomous learners can make very good use of this principle. Thus, training in understanding the principle and its applications is a useful step towards language learning autonomy.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have looked at the four strands as a way of getting a good balance of language learning opportunities within a course. The weakness of this may be that some activities may require, at least, a certain minimum amount of time in order to be effective. If this minimum amount of time was larger than the proportion of time that they would get in a particular course, the principle of the four strands would not be being effectively applied. For example, Nation and Wang's (1999) study of graded readers suggested that learners need to read, at least, one graded reader every week if they are to get the best conditions for vocabulary learning from such reading. If they read less than this, they will not get the amount and spacing of repetitions that they need to help learning. In this particular case, a minimum amount of time is more important than a particular proportion of the total course. This is probably not an isolated example of such an issue, particularly with regards to vocabulary learning.

The general idea that lies behind the four strands principle is that there is no one easy answer to language learning. Learning from input alone is not enough. Intensive deliberate learning by itself is not enough. There needs to be a balance of well proven learning activities across the four strands.

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