

STEPPING UP THE QUALITY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: HOW CAN NATION'S FOUR-STRANDS PRINCIPLE HELP?

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Abstract: Certainty in the world of language teaching can seem illusive in these 'post-method' times. Theories come and go, policy initiatives and education buzz words (e.g., 21st Century skills, Industry revolution 4.0, Deep Learning, Design Thinking) ebb and flow like waves on the shore, and technology is expanding the possibilities available to teachers and learners faster than ever before. Where can language educators turn for reliable principles to guide and enhance their understanding and practice? In this article, I argue that Nation's (2007) four-strands principle offers a coherent, theoretically sustainable and highly practical answer to this question, and one that deserves more attention in the field.

Keywords: Nation's four-strands principle, curriculum, learning opportunities, autonomous learning, teaching approaches

1. Introduction

This discussion paper seeks to raise awareness of the usefulness for language teaching of the four strands principle introduced by Nation (2007). This principle (which I explain below) has much to offer language teachers but is largely unknown in the field. In writing this paper, I seek to offer a fresh account of the four strands to a readership who may not be familiar with them.

I begin with a question: *What is the least you need to know to teach language in a principled way?* This might seem like an odd question. Why focus on 'the least'? There are two answers. The first is found in what is known as Occam's Razor, a principle of parsimony and logic that states that in seeking explanations and in building theories, we should keep things as simple as possible. Thus, if faced with two competing ideas that aim to explain the same phenomenon, the simpler of the two is to be preferred. Perhaps one way to restate this is that we should privilege elegance over complexity. The second answer is more practical. Teachers are busy people with many competing demands on their time. If they are to be guided to teach in a principled way, then a straightforward set of principles that provide them with core foundations for effective teaching without overloading them with theoretical complexity would seem to be a good place to start. The argument mounted in this paper is that the four strands principle (Nation, 2007; Nation & Yamamoto, 2012; Newton & Nation, 2021) achieves this aim.

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2. Of Principles

Let us now turn to this word *principles*. Wikipedia offers an apt definition of a principle as being, “a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principle>). For language teaching, I see principles as evidence-based statements to guide the thinking and actions of language educators based on what we have learnt from research and theory-building. Once principles are established and agreed on, they act as a bridge between theory and language teaching practice. In this role, they can guide curriculum design, be used as a checklist to improve and evaluate learning opportunities and teaching effectiveness, and as an agenda for professional dialogue and teacher professional development. As Ur (2013, p. 468) argues,

“...language teaching should not be primarily based on a method but rather on a set of principles and procedures based on teachers’ practical situated experience, enriched by research, theory, and practice relevant to teaching and learning of any subject, as well as those relating to linguistics and applied linguistics”

Over the past 20 years or so, theorists in educational applied linguistics have developed various influential sets of principles that provide language teachers with solid evidence-based guidelines for teaching. These include (in chronological order): Kumaravadivelu’s *Macrostrategies for Language Teaching* (2003); *The Ten Principles of Instructed Second Language Learning* (Ellis, 2005); *Seven Opportunity Standards* (Crabbe, 2007), *The Principled Communicative Approach* (Arnold, Dörnyei, & Pugliese, 2015); and *Ten Methodological Principles* (Long, 2015). I list these sets of principles because each set offers insightful answers to the question this paper began with (*What is the least you need to know to teach language in a principled way?*) and so each set is well worth following up on. My position in this article, however, is that the four strands principle offers a simpler and more elegant model for encompassing many of the principles listed in these frameworks.

3. The Four Strands Principle

The main job of the language teacher can be seen as planning and facilitating *opportunities* for learning to take place. A learning opportunity refers simply to a specific cognitive or metacognitive activity that a learner can engage in that is likely to lead to learning (Crabbe, 2007, p. 118). For teaching to fulfil its potential, teachers (and learners) need to be actively engaged in identifying and managing learning opportunities. Indeed, one could argue that teachers are only as effective as the learning opportunities they provide. From this perspective, the goal of a curriculum is to provide a systematic and principled range of learning opportunities and to facilitate the take-up of those opportunities so as to achieve specified learning outcomes (Crabbe, 2007, p. 120). This focus on learning opportunities is at the heart of the four-strands principle. In its simplest form, this principle states that to ensure effective language learning, a language program should contain four types of learning opportunities, namely opportunities to:

- engage with meaningful *input* (e.g., reading and listening for meaning)
- participate in meaningful *output* (e.g., speaking and writing for meaning)
- pay deliberate attention to *language* forms and structures (e.g., accuracy-focused practice and deliberately memorizing new words)
- develop *fluency* (e.g., to practise using learnt knowledge in real language use) (Nation, 2007)

The learning opportunities listed above are equivalent to the four strands of Meaning-Focused Input (MFI), Meaning-focused Output (MFO), Language-focused Learning (LFL), and Fluency Development (FD). The term ‘strands’ is used because they are long continuous sets of learning conditions that run through a whole program.

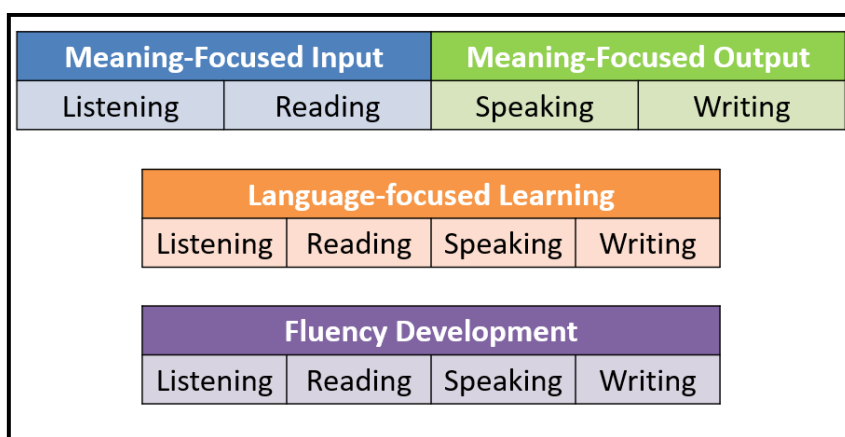
It is important to understand that *strands* are distinct from *skills* (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). To illustrate, consider the following three options for teaching a reading lesson.

- Option 1. Learners study a difficult text sentence by sentence, with the teacher helping them translate it as they read, as is the case with the grammar translation method.
- Option 2. Learners read a moderately difficult text carefully to find the main points in it and then use these points to solve a problem or answer questions.
- Option 3. Learners read simple graded readers silently for 10 minutes in class for the purpose of enjoying reading and developing their reading speed.

While the skill of reading is central in all three options, the way that learners use language in each is very different. In option 1, learners read to study language forms (words and sentences) in a text. In option 2, they read to develop communicative reading skills. In option 3, they read to absorb language unconsciously. From a strands perspective, these three options correspond to the strands of language-focused learning, meaning-focused input, and fluency development. But from a skills perspective, these important distinctions are overlooked because all three options focus on developing reading skills. For this reason, a skills-based view of teaching fails to adequately identify the learning processes that an activity offers. These ideas are illustrated in Figure 1 in which skills are embedded within each strand. The key point is that *strands* are defined by the different ways that learners engage with language whereas *skills* tell us less about this.

Figure 1

Language Skills and the Four Strands



A cursory look at many language programs indicates that the four strands principle is rarely achieved in practice. I believe that one reason for this is an over-emphasis on organizing learning in terms of skills, which fail to foreground the underlying learning conditions inherent in an activity. It is these conditions that the four strands principle seeks to make more explicit and which are described in detail in the following sections.

I will now discuss each strand in turn, and for each I ask the question, ‘What learning conditions need to be met for an activity to function in this strand?. We begin with meaning-focused input because of the centrality of input in any approach to language teaching and learning.

3.1. Meaning-focused Input (MFI)

MFI involves opportunities for learners to listen/view and/or read with a primarily focus on understanding what a written or aural text means. The goal is for language development through focusing on understanding messages. For example, primary school age learners might participate in shared reading of a simple story which engages their attention on how the plot unfolds.

For MFI to be effective, the level of difficulty of the input needs to be roughly tuned to the proficiency of the learners so that they are not having to spend too much time and effort decoding unfamiliar language. Text difficulty can be managed through selecting and/or simplifying texts or through activities that increase the learners’ familiarity with the language and ideas in the text. As a general principle, Nation (2013) argues that around 95% of the language of a text should be familiar if it is to be useful MFI. To achieve this, teachers need a good knowledge of their learners and of the linguistic demands of the texts used in class, and access to tools for text analysis and simplification such as can be found on websites such as Antconc.com or Lextutor.com.

For a reading or listening/viewing activity to function as MFI it needs to meet the five learning conditions listed below and represented by the acronym, ‘MINUS’ (Newton & Nation, 2021).

The conditions for learning from MFI

- M The learners’ main focus is on **meaning** (i.e., the message being conveyed)
- I The text and activities **interest** the learners
- N There is something **new** to learn
- U Text selection and scaffolding support **understanding**
- S The reading or listening experience is not too **stressful**

This set of conditions provides a simple checklist for teachers to use to ensure that a planned text-based lesson is indeed providing opportunities for learning through listening, viewing, or reading for meaning.

3.2. Meaning-focused Output (MFO)

The MFO strand involves activities in which learners speak or write to communicate a message. The learner’s attention should be mainly on the ideas they are conveying. Any attention they give to language forms will be in aid of communicating meaning more effectively. For example, in a classroom survey task on family structures, learners work in groups to generate a set of survey questions, which, once checked by the teacher for accuracy, they use to circulate around the class asking other students these questions. They will also answer questions asked by other groups. Each group then comes back together to consolidate their information and prepare a written and/or spoken report, which is then presented.

As you can see, each step of this task involves MFO – forming questions, asking questions, and writing and then presenting the report. Of course, the task also involves listening and attention to language forms, but these are necessitated by the goal of communicating

meanings, and so MFO is the main strand.

The MFO strand draws on the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995), which claims that the process of communicating (i.e., producing output) creates valuable cognitive and interactional processes that facilitate learning (see the earlier section on Principle 7). These processes include negotiating for meaning (Newton, 2013) and noticing a gap between one's known language and the language needed to communicate the intended meaning. Through these processes, MFO has been shown to expand the learner's linguistic, strategic, and interactional resources.

Somewhat surprising, popular language teaching methods in the 1970s and '80s such as the *comprehension approach* and the *silent way* did not view output as having much of a role in language learning. These approaches view the main rule of output as practising language that has already been learnt through drilling, grammar study, and so forth. But a large body of research as well as teachers' and learners' experiences show that MFO in the form of speaking and writing to convey messages push learners' language development forward in important ways (Swain, 1995). This point is captured in the phrase 'communicating to learn' (c.f., 'learning to communicate') (Waters, 2012), which points to the crucial insight that when learners successfully perform a challenging communication task, their performance is both a realization of previous learning and the site of new learning.

How do we know when a speaking or writing activity fits within the MFO strand? As with MFI, to answer is found in the five MINUS conditions, adjusted slightly to apply to MFO.

The conditions for learning from MFO

- M The focus is on **meaning** (communicating messages)
- I The activity **interests** the learners
- N There is something **new** to learn
- U The learners are supported to express themselves intelligibly and be **understood**
- S The speaking or writing experience is not too **stressful**

3.3. Language-focused Instruction (LFL)

The LFL strand involves opportunities for learners to pay deliberate attention to language features such as grammatical structures, new words, word formation or spelling or pronunciation. In this strand, language is treated as an object of study; the language system is the foreground and meaning in the background. This equates to what (Waters, 2012) refers to as a *learning to communicate* approach. Activities that fit into this strand include teaching about points of grammar, writing or spelling practice, pointing out errors in student writing and asking them to correct the errors, learning new vocabulary on flash cards and practising pronunciation.

The LFL strand was somewhat out of favour in mainstream ESOL in the 1980s, due mainly to the influence of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981, 1985), which claimed that grammar instruction led to knowledge about language but did not actually contribute to the implicit knowledge that underpins language proficiency. Subsequently re-evaluations of deliberate attention to language forms have revealed a rather more complicated picture, and one which supports the valuable role of instruction focused on language form (Boers, 2021; Norris & Ortega, 2000). Note though, that currently supported approaches to form-focused instruction are a long way from the traditional 'drill and kill' approach typical of older methods such as the audio-lingual method.

What learning conditions should a LFL activity meet to ensure that it is helping to develop learners' proficiency? A full answer to this question is complex, but for the purpose of

this overview, I propose four core conditions:

The Conditions for Fluency Development

1. LFL should be **learner-centred**: The language forms and features that learners spend time learning should be useful/needs-based and developmentally appropriate. This condition is particularly well met when LFL happens reactively, i.e., in response to errors learners make or gaps they notice when they are involved in meaningful language use.
2. Learners need opportunities to **notice** how new language features they have learnt are used in input.
3. It can be useful for learners to be guided to **compare** the new form or feature with their L1 and with their previous L2 knowledge. These comparisons help the learner to integrate the new form or feature into their developing L2 language system.
4. LFL should be **meaningful**: Meaningfulness is achieved when new LFL knowledge is used in MFI, MFO and FD. This ensures that language forms are not just learnt for the sake of learning declarative knowledge.

3.4. Fluency Development (FD)

The fourth strand, fluency development, involves opportunities to put familiar language to meaningful communicative use so as to develop smooth and effortless access to what has been learnt. Note that we usually associate fluency as referring to a speaker's ability to *speak* more smoothly. But fluency is equally relevant to the ability of a listener to listen or read or write more efficiently and effortlessly. For fluency to develop across all four skills, learners need opportunities to make *better use of what they already know*. That is, they need practice opportunities in which they put familiar language to communicative use, with some pressure to increase the smoothness and efficiency of the processes by which they access and use their linguistic resources. For example, in the 4-3-2 activity, each learner tells a partner about a topic for 4 minutes, then moves to another partner and repeats their talk, but this time in 3 minutes, and again with a third partner for 2 minutes. Here, we see incremental increases in time pressure pushing learners to be more fluent.

Another example is when learners work on an activity in groups and then report to the class or repeat their activity in front of the class (Newton & Nguyen, 2019). In these cases, the report to the class adds an element of pressure from the new audience. In reading, the same fluency gains can be achieved by reading texts that contain known language and aiming to incrementally increase the amount read within a set time frame. Ten-minute speed-reading programs are based on this principle (Millett, n.d.).

Fluency is often neglected in language programs, as the following quote eloquently explains:

“Although one component of fluency is automatic, smooth, and rapid language use, there are no provisions in current CLT methodologies to promote language use to a high level of mastery through repetitive practice. In fact, focused practice continues to be seen as inimical to the inherently open and unpredictable nature of communicative activities. Thus, when teachers believe that learning has reached the point where reinforcement of new forms through practice is necessary, they tend to revert to non-communicative means for attaining this end (such as pattern practice).” (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005, p. 327)

In our experience of learning a foreign language, many of us will recall how few opportunities for real, meaningful fluency development were available in comparison to the

amount of time invested in introducing new forms and structures to be learnt. Accordingly, in most contexts, fluency development needs to be a larger part of the learning experience.

A common question is ‘How is the FD strand different from MFI and MFO?’. FD is an extension of these two strands and so overlaps with them to some extent. We can distinguish them with reference to the learning conditions for each strand. The conditions for FD are listed below (Newton & Nation, 2021). Note how they differ from the MFI and MFO conditions

The Conditions for Fluency Development

1. Limited language demands - ‘Learn a little, use a lot’
2. Meaningful use (DeKeyser, 1998)
 - Not just practising language forms (i.e. structure drills), but practice that strengthens form-meaning/message connections.
 - Practice that is purposeful and directed at a meaningful outcome, objective, or performance.
 - Practice that engages the learners, affectively, cognitively, socially and behaviourally
3. Quantity of opportunities (Ericsson & Pool, 2016)
 - Lots of rehearsal & repetition are essential foundations for fluency development
 - Varied types of practice lead to better learning.
4. Pressure to perform at a higher level (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). Achieved through:
 - Giving learners planning time
 - Time pressure
 - An audience
 - Increasing independence from written notes
 - Conversational unpredictability

To illustrate these conditions, consider a counter example of a speaking task in which learners have to speak in front of the class using a lot of new language that they have not yet had time to learn adequately. In such an activity, none of the fluency conditions are met and so there is little opportunity for fluency to develop. In contrast, in tasks where the learners use already familiar language and ideas meaningfully to accomplish a goal, the conditions are in place for learners to increase the automaticity of language processing, i.e., to become more fluent. The survey task discussed earlier in relation to MFO is a good example. The sequence of activities in this task is largely within the MFO strand. But there are also aspects of these activities that are clearly FD, notably where learners have opportunities for repeated communicative use of the same language, such as when they circulate around the class and ask a series of questions repeatedly to different learners. And again, when groups pool their results and prepare and rehearse their report, repetition provides more fluency development opportunities. Here, the performance pressure is seen in the anticipated presentation of a report to the whole class.

4. Putting the Four Strands Principle to Work

Two key ideas can help to show how the four strands work in practice: balance and integration.

4.1. Balance

What balance of strands is desirable? Should certain strand(s) take priority? To answer

this question, it is worth looking briefly at the nature of balance in traditional methods such as grammar translation (GT), audio-lingual (AL) method or even communicative language teaching (CLT). You will see that in each one, the strands are invariably imbalanced. Thus, while methods such as GT give primacy to grammar instruction and undervalue meaningful use, others such as CLT prioritise oral communication but undervalue meaningful input and deliberate study of language form. In contrast, decades' worth of strong evidence from SLA confirm that for balanced language development all four strands are needed and should be present in a program in roughly equal proportions. As Newton and Nation (2021) argue, balancing the four strands offers the best way to help learners achieve balanced development in each skill area, along with fluency and better control of the sounds, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse features of the language.

Note that when this equal balance of the strands is achieved, 75% of learning time involves learners using language meaningfully/communicatively (i.e., the MFI, MFO and FD strands). This proportion is well justified by usage-based theories of SLA:

“Actual language use is a primary shaper of linguistic form and the foundation for language learning”, and that “A first usage-based tenet is that language and language learning are meaning based” (Tyler & Ortega, 2018, p. 5-6).

This quote reveals a strong link between empirically-based theoretical claims from SLA and the four strands principle. It counters the all-too-common assumption that to help learners learn a language, the teachers' main job is to provide a lot of teacher-fronted explicit instruction on language. On the contrary, the four strands principle points to the importance of embedding such explicit instruction within a rich range of opportunities to *use* language meaningfully. As Halliday (1993) so cogently argues (*italics mine*),

“Language is not a domain of human knowledge (except in the special context of linguistics, where it becomes an object of scientific study); language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge” (p. 94).

This principle applies to learners at all levels of proficiency (Shintani, 2013, Newton & Bui, 2020). A final point is that learning opportunities beyond the classroom have increased exponentially through the access learners have to a huge range of resources for using and learning language via digital technologies. Thus, considerations of balance must include opportunities both inside and beyond the classroom.

4.2. Integration

Effective teaching requires that the four strands are integrated. This interweaving of the strands offers learners integrated opportunities to meet the same target content and associated language features across all four strands. Three points follow from this:

1. Learning in each strand is strengthened by learning in the others.
2. FD is only possible with learnt material and so relies on and naturally emerges from MFI and MFO.
3. The main value of LFL is supporting the other strands.

As Dörnyei (2009, p. 36) points out, ‘The teacher’s main job is to maximize cooperation between implicit and explicit learning’ This requires that language that is deliberately learnt must also be met extensively in MFI and used in MFO and FD. Otherwise, this deliberate learning remains inaccessible in actual language use, a problem that is pervasive in language learning.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is based on these principles, and especially the

third one. A fundamental tenet of TBLT, at least as promoted by Long (2015) is that LFL should not be pre-planned and presented in a grammatical syllabus. Rather LFL should be reactive, in that the LFL strand is used to address gaps in learners' knowledge and proficiency that are revealed in the process of performing tasks. Turning again to usage-based SLA, we see the same principle:

“Usage-based views of language development show that the bulk of language learning happens implicitly. But much of the fine-tuning also happens explicitly with the aid of top-down, conscious processing. It follows that learning proceeds by dynamic interactions between implicit and explicit processing.” (Tyler, et al., 2018, p. 318)

5. Conclusions

The four strands are not typically visible as discrete elements in textbooks and lessons. Instead, they are emergent in the learning opportunities that teachers create, keeping an eye on balance and integration. As such, the four strands provide teachers with a useful heuristic for maintaining a balance of learning opportunities and troubleshooting when language-related problems arise. They can help teachers to not just answer important questions about what and how to teach but also to *ask* the right questions.

For example, a teacher might ask ‘How should I teach pronunciation?’. From a four strands perspective, a better version of this question is ‘What opportunities for pronunciation learning should be in the programme?’. And the answer is found in the four strands: opportunities to hear and distinguish the target pronunciation features, opportunities to deliberately study these features, opportunities to put them to use in communication, and opportunities to develop automaticity in their use.

Similarly, a question might be ‘How can I teach speaking?’, The four strands version of this question is ‘How can I find out if I have a well-balanced conversation course?’. And the answer is to look at how well the four strands are represented in that course. Here, a teacher might wonder at what role MFI has in a conversation course. One answer is that there should be plenty of opportunities to listen to the kinds of talk that the learners need to practice, and of course, listening is always the flip side of speaking.

A final point is that principles only work to the extent that they make sense to teachers. Thus, it is worth encouraging teachers to bring their principles into the light before imposing external principles on them. As Larsen-Freeman (2012, p. 37) so aptly explains,

“Only those who are intimately acquainted with the situation, with the students, and with themselves can make the choices they are uniquely suited to make. ...whereas once teachers could be trained in the one way of language teaching, now they must be educated to choose among the options that exist”

My hope is that teachers find the four strands principle to be a valuable tool for making informed pedagogic choices, one that aligns with their expertise and that enhances their capacity to have an even more positive impact on the learning outcomes of their students.

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NÂNG CAO CHẤT LƯỢNG GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH: NGUYÊN LÝ 4 CẤU PHẦN CỦA NATION CÓ THỂ HỖ TRỢ NHƯ THẾ NÀO?

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Tóm tắt: Sự chắc chắn trong lĩnh vực giảng dạy ngôn ngữ có vẻ là ảo tưởng trong thời kỳ ‘hậu phương pháp’ này. Các lý thuyết đến và đi, các sáng kiến trong chính sách và các thuật ngữ thời thượng trong giáo dục (ví dụ: Những kỹ năng thế kỷ 21, Cách mạng công nghiệp 4.0, Học sâu, Tư duy thiết kế) lên xuống như sóng vỗ bờ, và công nghệ đang mở rộng các khả năng sẵn có cho người dạy và người học nhanh chóng hơn bao giờ hết. Các nhà giáo dục ngôn ngữ có thể tìm những nguyên lý đáng tin cậy ở đâu để điều hướng và nâng cao hiểu biết cũng như thực tiễn của họ? Trong bài viết này, tôi nêu quan điểm rằng Nguyên lý 4 cấu phần của Nation (2007) đưa ra một câu trả lời chặt chẽ, bền vững về mặt lý thuyết và có tính thực tiễn cao cho câu hỏi trên, và là một câu trả lời đáng được lưu tâm trong lĩnh vực giáo dục ngôn ngữ.

Từ khóa: nguyên lý 4 cấu phần của Nation, chương trình giảng dạy, cơ hội học tập, học tập tự chủ, các đường hướng dạy học