

Article

The Relevance of Nation's "Four Strands Model" to Online Teaching

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Abstract

This paper applies Paul Nation's "Four Strands Model" to online teaching. It looks at the three strands that comprise "practice", as opposed to the one strand termed "language-focused learning" and discusses a variety of activities for each skill that are workable for online classes but nevertheless, allow the instructor to track whether the students have actually done their assigned work. Suggestions are made for how teachers can keep a record of, and assess, the students' work.

Keywords

Online practice, active learning, balanced practice, meaning-based activities, assessment

1 Introduction

Due to the huge increase in non-native speaker (NNS) English teachers world-wide in the past few decades (Moussu & Llurda 2008), there is concern about the proficiency levels of these teachers. In some cases, NNS teachers have the same level of language proficiency as a native-speaking teacher has (Inbar-Lourie, 2005), yet in other instances, the teacher's language proficiency may be only on *par* with that of the students they are teaching (personal observations). This variability of proficiency levels leads to Education Departments requiring their English teachers to follow prescribed textbooks and only give the 'correct' answers to students during their English lessons. In this model of language education, there is no room for students to go beyond the textbook and create their own language, and even if they did, the teacher might not be able to properly assess them. This is further exacerbated by the fact that in most situations teachers are teaching within a test-oriented pedagogical culture with a focus on mastering test-answers rather than using English for any real communicative purpose.

Sadly, even if instructors had the competence to teach their textbooks well, the result would, in most cases, not result in highly proficient users of the language. Students may have absorbed all of the basic grammar rules and 'know' the first 2000 most common words of English, but they have hardly ever had an occasion to *practice* what they have studied.

One study of Malaysian textbooks by Mukundan and Aziz (2009) reported that Malaysian students, in their secondary school career, encountered only 1438 words seven times or more, with seven being

the threshold for retaining the meaning of a word. See their “Table 3” displayed below as “Figure 1.” Uchihara, Webb, and Yanagihara (2019) in a meta-study report variations in the assumed threshold for vocabulary retention from 6 to 20, in the papers they examined. The point, however, is clear: students generally do not have enough exposure to basic vocabulary that they may need later to become more proficient users of the language.

Figure 1

The Number of Words Repeated Fewer than Seven Times in Malaysian Textbooks

TABLE 3

The number of words that are repeated fewer than seven times in the entire set of Malaysian Secondary School English Language Textbooks

No. of Occurrence in Form 1-5 Textbooks (times)	No. of Words	Percentage
7 times and more	1438 words	71.9%
Less than 7 times	423 words	21.2%
Zero	139 words	6.9%

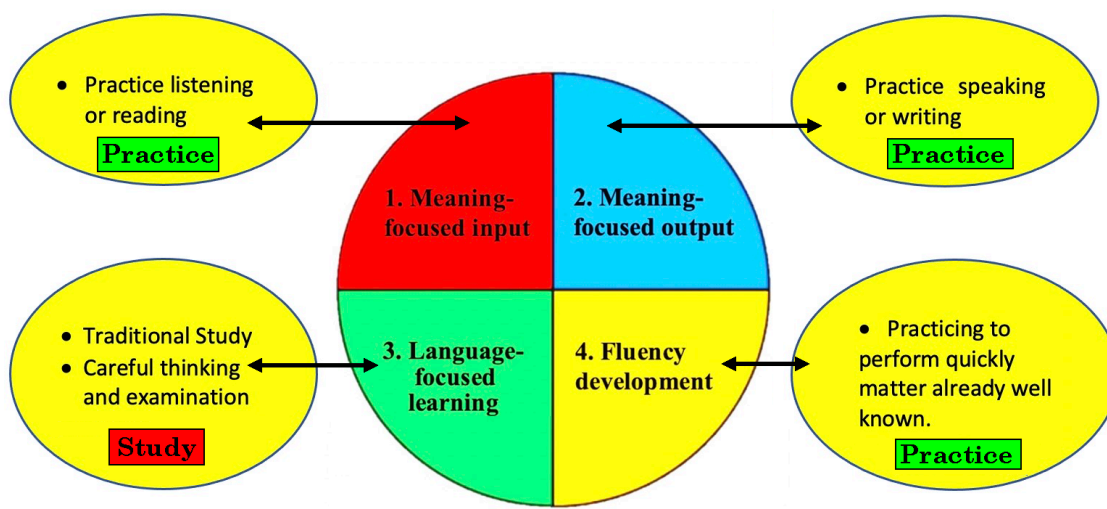
Paul Nation, of the University of Victoria at Wellington, writing on the ways to help students have more exposure to vocabulary has proposed a model for language instruction called the “Four Strands” in which he advises that, for effective language learning:

“It’s just simply a guideline for curriculum design and its aim is flexibility. The principle states that in order to have a well-balanced language course, you need to have four equal strands and equal in amount of time.” (Nation, 2017, @8:44)

As illustrated in Figure 2, the model comprises four separate foci, (1) “Meaning focused input”, (2) “Meaning focused output”, (3) “Fluency practice”, and (4) “Language focused learning”. Nation asserts that teachers should aim to include 25% of each kind of activity in their in-class work as well as their out-of-class assignments. These 25% figures represent actual “time on task” which is, of course, for online assignments can only be estimated. Note that three of the four quadrants, representing 75% of actual on-task language learning should be devoted to *practice* while only 25% should consist of traditional textbook or teacher-talk-based instruction and explanation.

Figure 2

The “Four Strands” Annotated; 25% “time on task” for Each Quadrant



One problem for the teacher is that in-class learning, and most likely on-line learning, tends to center on the traditional “Language Focused Learning” aspect (quadrant 3 in Figure 2) with little time “on-task” for actual practice. Teachers are essentially spoon-feeding students knowledge but not providing them with the opportunities to practice what they have learned. While the language focus learning is indeed necessary, when using a textbook as lesson plans it tends to be the sole focus on the teacher’s and hence students’ attention.

In a talk that Nation gave for the U.S. Foreign Service Institute, he suggested that fluency practice should start early in language study:

“The idea that fluency is working with what is known to become really good at using what is known and at every level of proficiency, right from day one, there needs to be fluency development activities. It doesn’t start later in the course ...” (Nation, 2017, @13:47).

With the increased use of technology in classroom-based instruction we can examine the four strands in greater detail and suggest some common technology-based activities that teachers might consider assigning as practice activities.

2 “Active Learning” and Online Activities

2.1 A checklist for teachers

Any specific language activity can relate to more than one specific strand in Figure 2. Here are some examples followed by blank lines for the reader to list some of often-assigned activity types (Table 1). First, the students need to be directed to an online text (either on their laptop or mobile phone) that is suitable for the language proficiency of the students. For each activity that the students perform, the approximate percentage of each strand aspect related to that activity needs to be considered and the following questions need to be kept in mind: How much does each activity require meaning-focused communication, practice in fluency? How much is simple direct focus on the language?

Table 1

Sample Checklist for Teacher Reflection

Activity	Meaning focused input/output	Fluency Practice	Language-Focused study
Read a passage online and answer comprehension Qs	15%	15%	70%
Answer questions based on the grammar of the online reading	100%
Write your own reaction to the online reading	80%	20%
Prepare to report to your class or a group your reaction to what you have read. Practice first so you can speak quickly.	20%	80%

3 Activities Relevant to Each Strand

The remainder of this paper consists of suggestions for activities that promote language practice rather than focus on the language itself. The following six points should be considered when developing a fluency-based lesson plan.

- 1) The activities should be accomplishable by students using a mobile device.
- 2) There is some reasonable way for the instructor to track and assess the product.
 - A wider variety of activities are possible if a learning management system is used since it allows efficient tracking and assessment.
 - For some activities, a screenshot of the final product can be submitted as proof.
- 3) Activities that involve multiple steps where the various steps practice different skills can be used. For example, students: a) search for information from multiple sources on a topic of interest, b) write up the information as a coherent text, c) create an “infographic” of the information, d) record a short oral summary for sharing with other students, e) transcribe the recording of one of the other students.
- 4) Activities that allow the students to interact in English are useful. (This works better when the students come from different language backgrounds so that English is the main means of communication.) If the interaction is in the students’ L1, then that aspect of the activity will mainly fit into the “Language-focused learning” strand, although if the talk concerns the meaning of the English, there will be a “meaning focused” aspect, as well.
- 5) The tasks should be attainable for the language level of most of the students in the class. These days it is acceptable for students to employ *linguaging* –using their L1 to discuss aspects of the task that would be too difficult for them to do in the target language (see Storch (2021) and Kim and Kim (2021) for justification of the use of the L1).
- 6) In practice, checking all student activities is a heavy burden for the teacher, but if sufficient proof of completion is required for each assignment, the teacher can spot check, periodically checking all student work for a particular assignment so that students see that the teacher is continually monitoring their work.

3.1 Practice in Receptive Skills

3.1.1 Reading

Extensive Reading: For the overall development of language proficiency, extensive reading is a requirement. However, when the students are at a distance, with no graded readers on hand, it becomes more of a challenge. Of course, there are sites like Xreading.com for those who can afford the small charge, but for many, this is not an option, particularly since it only works if everyone in the class has an account. There is a considerable amount of free material available online for students, but hardly any have a tracking system, and without one extensive reading is difficult to monitor. ER-Central.com, however, is one site that is free and does allow class enrollments. There are articles on a wide variety of topics and all are set to specific reading levels. Each reading is accompanied by a short quiz to check for general comprehension.

Another recently developed site, Online Reading for Fluency (<https://OR4F.org>) provides links to over 500 readings from a number of sources, and provides 3-item quizzes for each text. The results, however, are not aggregated for each student, so they will need to collect screenshots of their work if the teacher requires proof of task completion. Teachers can provide their students with the Excel template at <https://tinyurl.com/or4f-template> that allows them to fill in their results and cumulative a word count. This can then be submitted periodically or at the end of the term as proof of readings done.

Other kinds of online reading for meaning: Tasks such as following instructions, outlining, summarizing, or critiquing a reading passage are also useful activities, with the students required to respond via a spoken, recorded report or in a submitted text.

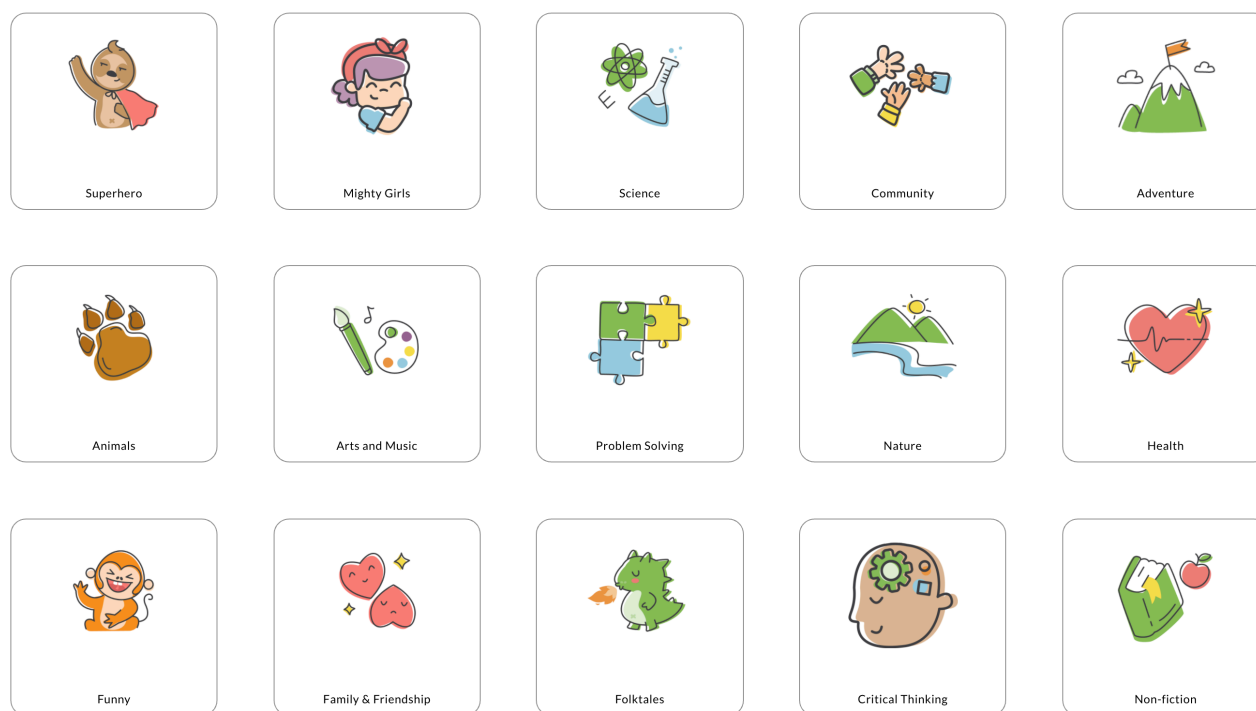
One wonderful online site is Let’s Read Asia sponsored by The Asia Foundation (Figure 3). The readings are available in multiple regional languages and can be printed out for class use as well as read

online. One assignment might be for students to record a story of their choice with feeling, as if reading it to a child. Peers could then vote on the best enactment.

Figure 3

Topic Choices in Let's Read Asia (<https://reader.letsreadasia.org/>)

7900 ~ books in ~ 15 Categories



3.1.2 Listening

Thanks to the omni-present internet, as is the case for reading, there is no limit to the amount of listening material available on the web, and with speakers of many varieties of English that the student might encounter in real life. Rather the issue is what to choose that is both comprehensible for the students and possible for the instructor to track. Tracking is particularly important for listening since there is a tendency for students to read rather than listen if a transcript is available. TED talks, for example, are well used in this respect. They provide not only transcripts in the original language, but translations, as well. Patricia Ryan's talk "Don't insist on English," for example, has transcripts in 49 languages. The level of the talks, however, is probably too high for most students. However, if the students are prepared by learning the vocabulary beforehand, and perhaps reading the transcript, that may be sufficient to prepare them for listening to the audio.

There are other sites, however, dedicated to providing listening material for learners, such as the British Council and Voice of America sites, ELLLO.com, and the for-fee EnglishCentral.com site with well over 10,000 curated videos. Of these, however, only English Central provides a means for teachers to see what students have listened to. Many of the ELLLO audio chats, however, are available on <https://er-central.com>, which allows activities to be tracked.

Shadowing is when a student listens to an oral text and mimics what he/she hears. It is a meaning-based activity that is often used for training simultaneous interpreters since it involves active listening

for meaning so that the student can immediately and accurately parrot the words. For online practice, this would involve using one device for playing a sound track, and then the student's smartphone for recording the shadowing, with the original sound also being recorded at a much lower volume in the background.

Taking dictation of a sound track is another useful activity that can be used with any level of student if the instructor selects suitable audio tracks.

3.2 Practice in productive skills

3.2.1 Speaking

Oral production would seem to be the most difficult to practice online. EnglishCentral.com, however, is one site that does allow a modicum of free use, that allows the student to try out [its] speaking technologies with a limited number of videos.” There are some advantages preparing a recording of one's voice rather than speaking synchronously. When recording, the student can rehearse his talk, which yields fluency practice as well as meaning-based output. Reading a story as if to a child has been mentioned earlier. Other activities such as summarizing an article that has been read or listened to, commentaries on some aspect of the local culture or people's behavior, descriptions of how to do something. The choice of activities is only limited by the instructor's imagination. Recorded activities, however, do take a considerable time for the instructor to review, but strategies such as having peers comment on each other's production, or group listening by the instructor and whole class can make the process more efficient.

3.2.2 Writing

The main challenges with online writing activities are creating a suitable audience. Another issue is assigning topics that include personal elements so that students do not try and plagiarize from the internet. The advent of translation tools, however, with their ever-increasing accuracy does present a challenge for instructors who are expecting that students will produce original texts without aid.

Keeping a diary, perhaps one focused on their language learning activities and reflections on the strategies they used would not only provide writing practice but also stimulate students' awareness of how they learn and how they might improve their learning, e.g better time-management.

One meaning-based activity that might be fun as well, would be the production of an “**infographic**” on any of a range of themes specified by the instructor. Students can use <https://www.picmonkey.com/> or <https://piktochart.com/> which permit free trials of their software for constructing infographics.

3.3 Fluency development

Fluency development revolves around the use of language that is already nearly mastered by the students so that both the vocabulary and the syntax required are not an obstacle. Fluency activities may target any of the four language skills.

Newton & Nation in multiple editions of their book in *Teaching ESL_EFL Listening and Speaking* (2020) have defined the “fluency strand” thus:

The fluency strand only exists if certain conditions are present. (1) All of what the learners are listening to, reading, speaking, or writing is largely familiar to them. That is, there are no unfamiliar language features or largely unfamiliar content or discourse features. (2) There is some pressure or encouragement to perform at a faster than usual speed. (3) There is a large amount of input or output. (4) The learners' focus is on receiving or conveying meaning.

Some of the activities that these authors suggest are more amenable to remote or online practice than others:

Speed reading – Since there should be no vocalization, even no sub-vocalization with speed reading, all that can be asked of the student is to read a passage as quickly as possible. Assigning a passage and then having the students report how long it took would be one, highly inaccurate way of ascertaining that they had read the passage.

Repeated listening – Or a variant, “Narrow listening” requires the student to listen to the same short audio, or perhaps a podcast, multiple times until it can be completely comprehended.

4/3/2 – The 4/3/2 technique involves saying the same content multiple times with a decreasing time limit, not necessarily 4, 3 and 2 minutes as the name implies. All three versions can be recorded, or perhaps only the last version which should ideally be relatively free from pauses and hesitations.

The poster carousel/gallery walk activities – Since there should be no vocalization, even no sub-vocalization with speed reading, we normally think of carousel or gallery walk activities as requiring a physical presence, there are numerous possibilities for virtual versions, as well. “Miss G”, an American high school teacher, presents 10 possibilities at <https://writeonwithmissg.com/2021/01/20/10-ideas-for-virtual-gallery-walks/>. One enhancement might be to use the free online site, <https://peereval.mobi> so that students may evaluate all of the student productions based on criteria that the instructor establishes using their own mobile device. They can perform their evaluations synchronously, as they listen, or afterwards from recordings.

10-minute writing – Sometimes called “quickwriting,” with a time limit that does not necessarily have to be 10 minutes, involves the student writing on a word file continuously, without prior planning and without the use of a dictionary or careful consideration of the grammar and without stopping to erase/delete anything already written.

Listening to easy stories – Some publishers of graded readers maintain sites where the audio of their books is freely accessible. If readers at a level well below the current language level of the students are selected, they should be able to understand them fluently. “Eli” is one publisher that offers free audio (<https://www.eligradedreaders.com/en/free-eli-readers/english-elt.html>).

4 Assessment

When using online teaching/learning it is difficult to assign grades based on the quality, accuracy, or correctness of what students submit as their work. Writing, for example, is a burdensome task even in a grounded classroom. But online material often created and submitted by non-standard means is even more challenging. Since, however, it is the *degree of practice* that the student receives, rather than the accuracy which is important for language improvement, keeping track of who has and has not done each task might be sufficient for many assignment types (this, of course, needs to be made clear to the students). Plagiarism must be discouraged at all levels and with all writing activities.

A simple spreadsheet with a column for each assignment may be sufficient to record students’ assigned online language practice activities. If the teacher uses an online spreadsheet, such as Google’s, this can be freely editable so that the students can enter their own data.

As for the entries in the column, in the simplest case, a comment such as “OK” or the date of completion can be entered, but more complex monitoring can also be done such as specifying that students have entered the number of words written, the number of comments they have made on other students’ work on WhatsApp.

5 Conclusion

With the advent of online resources, teachers and students have many more opportunities to practice using the language they have learned in class. Many of these online activities allow students to be involved in meaningful communication rather than rote learning, and the more choice they have in what to practice, the more students learning a language will be motivated to learn.

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