

Four Strands Activities for Language Learners

Language learners may often lack balance in their study habits by focusing primarily on grammar drills, test preparation, and reading comprehension (test-like) questions. Moreover, many language teachers still use the archaic grammar-translation method, which lacks any theory and research evidence to support it. “It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, Kindle location 144).

And most critically, the grammar-translation method fails to focus on and promote meaningful communication. To get balance in language learning and increase focus on meaningful communication, Nation (2013) recommends the Four-Strands. With the Four Strands, learners balance (1) getting meaningful input, (2) producing meaningful output, (3) practicing fluency, and (4) focusing on the structure of language.

In what follows, we’ll look at several tried and tested activities that teachers and learners can use to balance their language teaching and learning by applying the Four Strands framework. With the following activities, learners do not only practice real communication in their language classes, but they also experience a dynamic, active, effective, and enjoyable learner-centered classroom.

Input + Output Activities

Walking Dictation. Post a short, easy text on the wall or on a desk away from students. Put students in pairs: a Speaker and a Listener. And put them a good 10 to 20 steps away from the text. The Speaker walks to the text and reads it. The Speaker (repeating the text in their head or out loud) returns to the Listener and dictates the text. The Listener writes the text. The Listener negotiates for meaning. “Again please?” “What was that?” “How do you spell that?” The Speaker walks back and forth as many times as needed to finish the dictation. With a new text, partners switch roles.

Walking dictation works as a great warm-up, fo-

cusating activity. Texts can be between 20-40 words in length. Ideally, the texts introduce or highlight the theme or topic of the lesson. Make sure the text is at the right difficulty for students. If the text has a word or two that the students don’t know, the teacher can preview only those words, but if the text has too many unknown words, it won’t work well for dictation. Texts from Brainyquote.com or Goodreads.com/quotes often work well.

Problem-Solver. In this activity, we ask students to solve problems related to input-content. We can do the activity before or after interacting with content. For example, in class students interact with a story about a man named Gerald who is having trouble finding a partner. To do a problem-solver activity with this content, Nation (2013) says that these keywords produce tangible outcomes: *suggest, choose, and rank*. So, for this story, here’s a problem solver. (A) **Suggest** 5 things Gerald can change about his physical appearance AND his character to become more appealing. (B) Each student **chooses** their favorite solution, and/or (C) **rank** your solutions from best to worst.

Picture Gap. This activity works as an information gap activity where Student A describes a picture to Student B, and Student B draws the picture. The information gap is that Student B cannot see the picture on the screen in the classroom. Students see these directions: (1) Get in pairs -- in a gap position where Partner A sees the picture on the screen and Partner B does not see the picture on the screen. (2) Partner A describes the picture. (3) Partner B listens, draws the picture. When students are done, the teacher chooses a few pictures and shows them to the class.

Notes: More than anything, the teacher should emphasize the outcome of successful communication more than the artistic quality of the drawings -- though the students do enjoy great drawings. With a successful outcome of communication, we simply see that Partner A successfully communicated the key elements of the picture, and that Partner B was able to draw them. Ideally, we use images related to the story or topic of the day, and we remind stu-

dents that “we naturally talk about what we read and watch.” As for making images, AI image generators (like ChatGPT) work extremely well for this activity.

Input + Fluency Activities

Speed Up Read Aloud. This works as a fluency-building activity that helps students practice reading familiar language quickly and confidently. We use a story or text where learners know almost 100% of the words and grammar patterns. This is a key because learners cannot practice fluency with language they do not know. The text has two sections marked Section A and Section B. (1) In pairs, learners spread out around the room. Partner A reads aloud from Section A for 60 seconds while Partner B listens. (2) When the timer sounds, Partner A marks where they stopped. (3) Partner A repeats the process, reading from Section A again for another 60 seconds. When the timer sounds, Partner A counts how many more words they read the second time. (4) Partner B switches roles and completes the same steps with Section B. This activity encourages repeated reading of known language, helping students build speed, accuracy, and confidence in their reading fluency. Generally, learners read between 10 and 40 more words the second time, showing a clear gain in fluency after 2 minutes of practice.

Story Relay. This activity works as a communicative activity that helps students practice speaking, listening, and storytelling. (1) Divide the class into pairs and give each pair 6 picture cards (see **Beach Getaway** or **Mountain Adventure** below). (2) Each pair uses the cards to create a short, simple story. Partner A tells the story to Partner B, and then Partner B retells the same story back to Partner A in their own words. (3) After practicing, the pair joins another pair and retells the story together as a team, adding details or clarifying as needed. Students can repeat Step 3 again a third time with another pair for even more fluency practice. (4) Optionally, groups share their stories with the class, and the teacher can give feedback. This activity encourages communication as students describe, retell, and clarify stories, building fluency, confidence, and vocabulary.

This activity works mainly as a **fluency development task**, as students retell stories multiple times, they speak more smoothly and with more confidence. This activity also fits all the four strands: (1) **Meaning-Focused Input** when listening to stories, (2) **Meaning-Focused Output** when telling and retelling, and (3) **Language-Focused Learning** by practicing vocabulary and sentence patterns. It combines accuracy and fluency while keeping students engaged.

Story Relay Prompts (ideally with pictures)

Beach Getaway

1. A Sun Hat
2. A Surfboard
3. A Beach Ball
4. Sunglasses
5. An Ice Cream
6. Waikiki Beach, Hawaii

Set 4: Mountain Adventure

1. A Backpack
2. Hiking Boots
3. A Tent
4. A Compass
5. A Campfire
6. Mount Fuji, Japan

Language Focus Activities

Group Question Creation. Students read or listen to a story at their level. In groups, students create a set of 2-3 questions about the story. When ready, each group chooses a writer, and the writer writes their questions on the board. The teacher checks each question for grammatical accuracy by eliciting corrections and active participation from the class. After the sentences are corrected, each group quizzes each other with the questions they wrote. Each group chooses a speaker, and the speaker quizzes another group. Groups can quiz each other simultaneously, or the teacher can lead one group at a time to quiz another group.

Textual Enhancement. With textual enhancement, learners read a meaningful and enjoyable text or story that supports meaningful communication. To guide their attention to important language features, the teacher modifies the text using visual cues. For example, key words might be **bolded**, underlined, or highlighted in a different color to emphasize grammar, vocabulary, or sentence patterns. These changes help learners notice and remember the language while still focusing on the story’s meaning. This approach aligns with Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis, which highlights the importance of noticing for language learning (Schmidt, 1990). For instance, a story might emphasize past tense verbs such as *walked* or articles like *a* and *the*. Textual enhancement is a helpful tool for drawing attention to language patterns and likely works best when learners encounter it repeatedly across different stories or texts.

Team Sentence Builder. This activity works as a fun and interactive way for students to practice grammar while creating sentences together. Students work in small groups of 4 to 6, and each group focuses on a target grammar structure, such as the past continuous. One student starts the sentence with a

