Parity of learning tasks in New Total English coursebooks

David Geba Abi Anandi[1], Fransiskus Xaverius Mukarto[1]

[1]Sanata Dharma University, Indonesia

Abstract

Coursebooks have an essential function in language instruction since they function as not only the guidance for both educators and learners in conducting learning programs but also the primary source of learning materials and learning tasks. Nevertheless, language learning program provides an imbalanced opportunity to develop students' language skills equally. This study sought to analyze the balance of the learning tasks in New Total English Coursebooks in terms of the four strands. The research question in this study was "From the perspective of the Four Strands, what is the frequency distribution of learning tasks in New Total English Coursebooks?" In order to answer the research question in this study, the researchers used content analysis. The total of 637 learning tasks were analyzed in this study from three coursebooks. In selecting the samples of learning tasks, the researchers applied stratified random sampling. The findings showed that the highest frequency of strand found was meaning-focused input with 28.08%. The fluency development strand occupies 25.79% and language-focused learning occupies 23.57% of the whole learning tasks. Lastly, the meaning-focused output had the lowest frequency with 22.54%. In conclusion, the coursebooks are proven to provide balanced distributions of the four strands. The findings of this study suggest that English instructors use the coursebooks in classrooms as they provide equal balance of the four strands.

INTRODUCTION

Richards and Rogers (2014) mention that instructional materials define daily learning objectives with the intention of achieving the objectives of the curriculum. As a result, a successful learning process is highly influenced by instructional materials (Hanifa, 2018). Among different types of instructional materials, coursebooks are thought as one of the major facets in any contexts in education, together with teachers and learners (Arab and Rastgou, 2022).

In choosing the appropriate coursebooks, learners and teachers must consider the distribution of language focus to develop their skills and knowledge equally. Learners are often not given the equal opportunity to improve their language skills. The distribution of focus on language learning activities are characteristically imbalanced (Funk, 2012). The main focus of learning is on reproducible activities that emphasize grammatical precision, while oral fluency abilities receive less attention (Funk, 2012). When developing learning materials, it is important to take into account not only the objectives but also the learning methods as well as learning materials of (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005).

The four strands theory is based on research on second language acquisition (Nation, 1996). A good language course, according to the Four Strands Theory, should place an equal emphasis on four important elements, dealing with focus on input, output, language learning, and development of fluency. Lightbown (2014) in Burgoine (2017) states that the framework suggested by Nation offers a guidance on how courses and curriculum plans should be structured. It includes the variation of activities and contexts which students need to make sure that as they learn academic material, their language development advances. Additionally, the academic material chosen is to be appropriate to their not only language proficiency but also age.

Previous studies regarding analysis of coursebooks have been conducted. Some of the studies focused on analysing gender and cultural representations in coursebooks (Zahara et al., 2022; Parlindungan, Rifai, and Safriani, 2018; Yonata and Mujiyanto, 2017). Some of the previous studies focus on analysing questions in English coursebooks (Abdelrahman, 2014; Zareian, Davoudi, Heshmatifar, and Rahimi, 2015; Zaiturrahmi, Kasim, and Zulfikar, 2017). Some of the studies also focused on analysing tasks in coursebooks (Ayu and Indrawati, 2018; Abhar, 2017; Arab and Rastgou, 2022). The previous studies mentioned were used as the references for the researchers in conducting this study.

Learning tasks serve as the important aspects of coursebooks in improving language skills and knowledge. Even though numerous studies have explored different aspects of coursebooks, a few have employed the Four Strands theory as the criterion to analyse learning tasks. Based on the background of this study and previous studies, this study aimed at analysing the learning tasks in New Total English Coursebooks from the perspective of the Four Strands. The research question in this study was "From the perspective of the Four Strands, what is the frequency distribution of the learning tasks in New Total English Coursebooks?". The researchers narrowed the focus of the study to three coursebooks of an English coursebook series namely New Total English Coursebooks.

The nature of coursebooks

Using a coursebook, a teacher can follow a framework that is in line with the curriculum. Demir and Ertas (2014) mention that the most frequently used course materials for transferring both skills and knowledge are coursebooks, which are regarded as the essential component of every curriculum and contribute to content learning. They also mention that coursebooks act as the resource for courses, providing a variety of practices and examples of the course content. Jafarigohar & Ghaderi (2013) mention that coursebooks establish the content to be taught, the timing, the method, and the outcomes to be learned. Thus, it may be said that coursebooks serve as the guidelines for instruction in classrooms. In English Language Teaching (ELT), coursebooks serve a variety of purposes (Cunningsworth, 1995). They serve as 1) the aids for less experienced teachers, 2) the sources of inspiration and ideas, 3) the sources of knowledge for learners about the language elements such as vocabulary, grammar, etc., 4) the language program's syllabus, 5) the sources for classroom activities 6) the resources of contents in forms of both oral and written presentations. Hence, coursebooks have an undeniably important function in guiding the process of language learning.

New Total English coursebooks

The coursebooks are published by Pearson Publication. Six books make up the New Total English series, which includes books for advanced, upper-intermediate, intermediate, pre-intermediate,

elementary, and beginner levels. The coursebook series also includes CEFR reference levels from A1 to C1. As written in the publisher's website, the coursebook series is one of the coursebook series designed for general adult courses.

Backward design
The phrase "backward design" describes a style of program preparation that begins with the desired results first before selecting the kinds of evaluation and instructional approaches to be applied throughout the learning processes (Llerena, 2020). Three stages make up backward design are 1) the desired results identification, 2) acceptable evidence determination, and 3) learning experiences and instruction planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Clarity of priorities, which is referred to as looking at existing content standards and evaluating the expectations of the curriculum being used, is determined in the identifying the desired results and includes taking into account the learning goals. A learning program's assessment is decided upon during the step of determining acceptable evidence. Lastly, choosing the activities that will help students successfully attain the targeted goals is a key component of the planning learning experiences and instruction stage. Additionally, relevant learning experiences yield the results that educators want students to demonstrate (Spady, 1994).

Learning tasks
In the process of achieving the learning goals, learners need to do learning tasks. Anderson and Pesikan (2016) mention that learning tasks are designed to help students progress from ignorance to knowledge or from incompetence to competency. Skehan (1996) in Ellis (1997) says that the completion of tasks is seen as having some priority, meaning is important, there is a connection to the actual world, and the judgment of task performance is based on the result. English coursebooks provide tasks as part of the English teaching materials (Muhammad, 2008). According to The Council of Europe (2020), tasks are defined as any deliberate actions which are necessary by individuals to achieve the outcomes in the context of problem solving, obligations realization or achieving learning objectives. Learning tasks are defined as activities where there is a connection to real-world circumstances, the performance of students is assessed based on the task's conclusion, and the focus is on the meaning (Skehan, 1998 in Tsiplakides, 2011).

The four strands
Nation (1996) proposes a framework for language learning, which is the Four Strands. The Four Strands is a theory consisting of an equal proportion of focus in language learning. The four strands are meaning-focused output, fluency development, meaning-focused input, and language-focused learning.

Meaning-focused input
As highlighted by Krashen (1981), input, as defined by i+1, is the procedure used to comprehend a language through listening and reading at one-higher-level than students' current understanding. The level of understanding "I" is the language, while the level "+1" is one level higher. Input hypothesis emphasizes the exposure of a language for students in a communicative context (Gass & Mackey, 2015). In addition, the language being exposed to the learners need to be slightly above their current level of understanding. The meaning-focused input strand is accomplished through reading and listening exercises in which the focus of the learning is on the messages. The meaning-focused input can also be accomplished through sign and visual language in certain cases (Gass & Mackey, 2015). The conditions required in meaning-focused input strand are as follows:
- The majority of the input must be familiar to the learners.
- The students want to and are engaged in understanding the input.
- The learners are only familiar with a very small percentage of the language features.
- The context and background information can help learners learn the unfamiliar language components.
- There is a lot of input available.

Meaning-focused output
According to the output hypothesis, providing students with a ton of chances to write and speak in the classroom is needed (Swain, 1993). Meaning-focused output strand gives students opportunity to

communicate with others through both written and verbal expressions. Meaning-focused output is the strand where students concentrate on communicating their thoughts and messages to others through writing and speaking tasks (Nation, 2007). Learners are encouraged to make the most of their resources and linguistic skills in this strand. The conditions required in meaning-focused output strand are:
- The students write or speak about well-known subjects.
- Their main goal is to make someone else to understand what they are saying.
- Strictly limited use of unfamiliar language.
- The availability of tools to fill any gaps in their productive language knowledge, such as communication techniques, dictionaries, or prior input.
- Plenty of speaking and writing opportunities are given (Nation, 2007).

Language-focused learning
Nation (1996) mentions language-focused learning is achieved through purposeful learning in which the focus is on vocabulary, grammar, sounds and spelling of language, and explanations. Long & Robinson (1998) mention that focus-on-form occurs when students change their attention from meaning-focused to form-focused as a result of perceived difficulties with understanding or production. Focus on form should take place in meaning-focused strands in order to apply the new linguistic features they learn. Ellis (2015) states that to truly master new linguistic forms in communicative usage, learners require opportunities to engage in meaning-focused language activities. The conditions required in language-focused learning strand are:
- Learners are being exposed to language features deliberately.
- The students are urged to process language features in depth and thoughtfully.
- It is crucial to offer opportunities to focus on the linguistic features in order to maximize language learning.
- The features being chosen should be easy to understand and not rely on background information that the learners may not have.
- The other three strands should frequently reference the linguistic features covered in the language-focused strand.

Fluency development
This strand's activities are designed to encourage learners to use the language they are familiar with repeatedly with the intention of sharpening their skills rather than to teach them new information (Razman, Ismail, Ismail, 2022). The conditions required in fluency development strand are:
- The students' focus is on understanding or expressing meaning.
- Students are motivated to perform faster.
- There is a significant amount of input or output (Nation, 2007).
- The majority of input and output are already familiar to the students. In other words, there are no new languages, unfamiliar topics, or new language features.

METHODS
The researchers of this study applied content analysis. Content analysis is defined as a method aiming to identify specific characteristics of a material (Ary et al., 2010). The focus of content analysis is analysing and interpreting recorded materials such as magazines, journals, books, essays, music, speeches, advertisements, photographs, and any other forms of electronic communication (Frankael et al., 2012). In conducting this study, the researchers adopted the steps of content analysis from Frankael, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) namely 1) deciding objectives, 2) describing terms, 3) defining the unit of analysis, 4) discovering relevant data, 5) develop a rationale, 6) develop sampling technique, 7) and planning coding categories. The steps were chosen since they are suitable with the purpose of this study and clearly define each step.

In total, there are 34 chapters involved in this study. In selecting the samples, the researchers applied stratified random sampling. According to Krippendorff (2019), stratified random sampling is done through systematic random sampling for each stratum, that comprises of the units of samples. Since this research involved three different levels of the English coursebooks, stratified random sampling was employed. The researchers took three random chapters from each level to analyse.

In content analysis, the most commonly utilized way is calculating the frequency, percentages, and ration of one occurrence to the whole occurrences (Frankael, Wallen, & Hyun,

2012). In analysing the samples of the learning tasks, the researchers categorized every learning task into the four strands based on the conditions they fit into. After categorizing the learning tasks into the four strands, the researchers calculated the frequencies and percentages of the categories. In transforming the data, the researchers used spreadsheet in *Microsoft Excel* to not only increase the accuracy level of the calculation, but also save time since the calculations were done automatically.

It is important to take into account the accuracy and credibility of studies in qualitative research (Gay et al., 2012). To improve the trustworthiness of this study, the researchers employed external audit. External audit or peer debriefing is defined as a process in qualitative studies where the researchers invite an individual outside the study to review the methods and interpretations of the study (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The researchers invited an external auditor to review the coding categories and the analysis of this study. The auditor was invited as the external auditor of this study because the expert has experience in coursebook designing as he has published a number of English coursebooks and he has experience in teaching English language at the university level. The mentioned criteria are the indicators in choosing the auditor for this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to group all of the learning tasks from the chosen chapters, fluency development, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and meaning-focused input strands were utilized. Table 1 shows the frequencies of the four strands in the learning tasks of New Total English Coursebooks.

Table 1. The frequencies of the four strands in New Total English coursebooks

No	Strands	Proportions	
		Frequency	Percentage
1	Meaning-focused input	355	28.08 %
2	Meaning-focused output	285	22.54%
3	Language-focused learning	298	23.57%
4	Fluency development	326	25.79%
	Total	**1264**	**100%**

The whole learning tasks analysed in this study consists of 335 meaning-focused input, 326 fluency development, 298 language-focused learning, and 285 meaning-focused output. The meaning-focused input has the highest frequency whereas meaning-focused output has the lowest frequency. It is critical to comprehend that There might be more than one strand in a single learning task. For instance, when learners are asked to work in pairs, the three meaning-focused strands are involved since learners would take turns speaking and listening. Subsequently, both receptive and productive actions occur in such activities. Additionally, the particular learning task also involves fluency development strand because the learners' focus is on communicating messages and utilizing what they already know.

Figure 1. shows the visualization of the learning tasks from the perspective of the four strands in the coursebooks.

Figure 1 shows that the fluency development strand comes in second with 25.79%, and the meaning-focused input strand comes in first with 28.08%. Additionally, 22.54% of the learning tasks are categorized as the meaning-focused output tasks and 23.57% as the language-focused learning tasks. The total course time should involve around 25% of the four strands (Nation, 2007). The results show that each strand in the learning tasks in the New Total English Coursebooks is spread equally. Because no strand makes up more than 30% of the total, no strand is dominant.

The meaning-focused strands in the four strands theory are meaning-focused output, meaning-focused input, and fluency development. These three strands are primarily concerned with conveying and receiving meaning or messages. The meaning-focused strands take up 76.41% of the overall learning tasks.

It is crucial that a course should consists of a small amount of language-focused learning strand (Nation, 2007). The entire course time should involve no more than 25% of language-focused learning strand (Nation, 2007). The results of this study show that 23.57% of the whole sample is taken up by learning tasks that are classified as language-focused learning. It indicates the coursebooks provide appropriate amount of language features learning for the students.
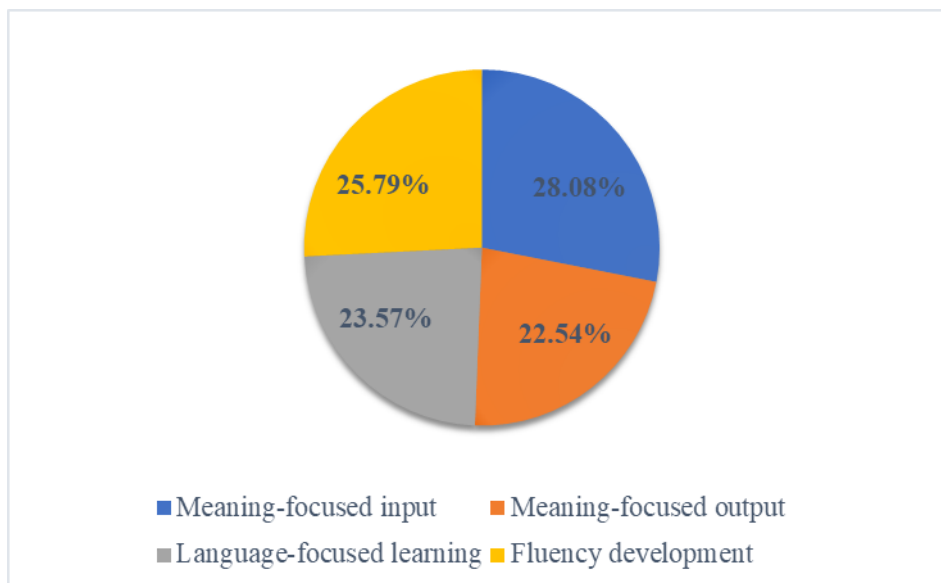
Figure 1. The distributions of learning tasks in New Total English coursebooks from the perspective of the four strands

According to the results, it was found that the learning tasks in New Total English Coursebooks' are appropriately distributed from the perspective of the four strands. The four strands framework suggests that in a well-balanced course, each strand has a roughly equal amount of time (Nation, 2007). The four strands framework offers a rationale for the three-to-one balance, according to which meaning-focused strands take up 75% of the course's total time and language-focused strand occupies the remaining percentage.

The study conducted by Arab & Rastgou shows similar results to this current study. The book they analysed offers an approximately the same balance of strands dealing with fluency development, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and meaning-focused input. On the contrary, another study that used the four strands found that the framework isn't being used to its full potential because meaning-focused output and input strands are disregarded. Consequently, fluency development, the final strand, was impacted (Nazeer, Shah, Sarwat, 2015). The followings are the discussions of the four strands in New Total English Coursebooks.

Meaning-focused input
Messages that the learners are likely to focus on make up the meaning-focused input strand (Nation, 1995). Figure 2 shows an example of a meaning-focused input strand learning task in the coursebooks.

The learners are requested to read news articles in the learning task mentioned above. After reading the news articles, the students are required to respond to questions about the news. As a result, to obtain the answers to the questions, students are expected to locate specific passages in the text. Intensive reading is the term for such reading assignments. Harmer (2015) defines intensive reading as reading activities that require students to read assigned texts and complete specific goals, such as responding to questions, transferring knowledge, questioning the text, and serving as themes for additional activities.

The task is categorized as meaning-focused input strand. It is because teachers ask students to read stories in order to respond to questions. Additionally, because the students are required to write responses, the learning task is also classified as meaning-focused output. Because all learners are prompted to read the material again rather than learning new language elements, the fluency development strand is also involved in this strand.
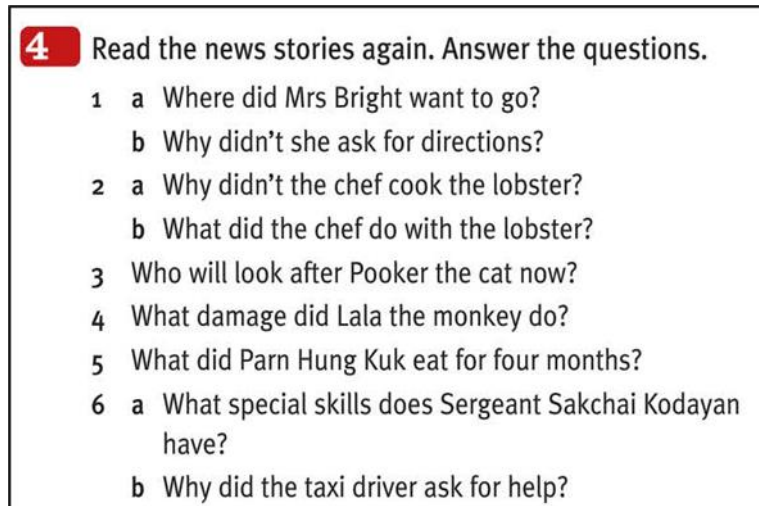
Figure 2. A meaning-focused input learning task

Meaning-focused output

The meaning-focused output strand is done through productive actions (Nation, 2007). According to the analysis, the meaning-focused output strand takes up 22.54% of the learning tasks in the New Total English Coursebooks. The productive abilities covered by the meaning-focused output strand are learned through presenting, writing, and speaking. Figure 3 shows an example of a meaning-focused output strand task in the coursebook.
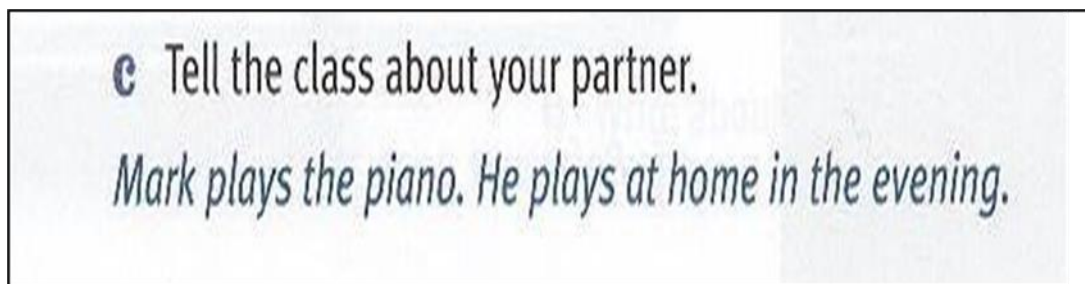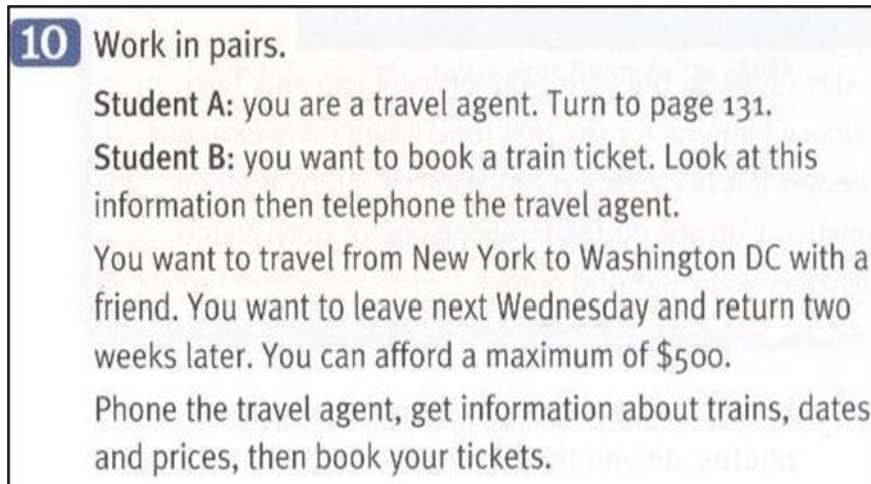
Figure 3. A meaning-focused output learning task

The learners are requested to communicate their findings from the prior activity to the class in the example of the learning assignment above. They are required to provide details regarding their partners in this situation. The author of the book also provides an illustration of how the description should be like.

The students' speaking and presentation skills are the main focus of the learning task. As a result, it belongs to the meaning-output strand. However, other learners are acting as listeners while a learner presents information. It implies that this learning task includes the meaning-focused input strand as well. This learning task also improves learners' fluency because it does not teach them to any new language characteristics or subjects. All three meaning-focused strands, fluency development, meaning-focused output, and meaning-focused input, are present in the learning activity.

Fluency development

The acquisition of fluency can be achieved through both receptive and productive actions (Nation, 2007). The four language skills which are writing, reading, speaking, and listening are all covered in this strand. Furthermore, the fluency development strand is included into one of the meaning-focused strands, with the intention of communicating and receiving meanings (Nation, 2007). Figure 4 is an example of a learning tasks which is categorized as fluency development strand task.

Figure 4. A fluency development learning task

In the learning task shown in figure 4, the students are required to work in pairs and place a call pretending to be a travel agent and a customer. Speaking and listening are required during the learning activity as they are expected to simulate a real-world conversation. The task's objective is for students to be able to explain and understand meanings to others.

The learning task also involves meaning-focused output and input because students are requested to communicate meanings in pairs. Additionally, if the learners are familiar with all the topics and linguistic components, fluency development also takes place (Nation, 1995). It can be said that this particular activity can be divided into strands for developing fluency and meaning-focused output and input.

Language-focused learning

Language-focused learning entails deliberately acquiring language aspects (Nation, 2007). Grammar, pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, and conversation make up the language features. The linguistic components, such as their overall meaning, the patterns they fit into, and their spoken and written forms, are also the emphasis of language-focused instructions (Nation, 1995). Lexis, syntax, sounds, and coherent devices were all language features that the researcher used in this study that were taken from Harmer's (2015) work. Figure 5 is an example of a language focused learning task in New Total English Coursebooks.

An illustration of a language-focused learning exercise is shown in figure 5. The learning assignment emphasizes word meanings. In the learning exercise, students are required to read words 1 through 8 and match them with meanings 1 through h. The learning assignment is classified as language-focused learning as the learners are encouraged to comprehend word meanings.

Instructional materials are the sources used by educators in the educational process to assist both teachers and learners in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum (Richards and Rogers, 2014). As one of the instructional materials, coursebooks serve as the three facets of any educational contexts, together with teachers and students (Ajoke, 2017). This current study shows that the coursebooks have a balance proportion of language learning in accordance with the Four Strands. The analysis was done by analysing the learning tasks in the coursebooks. It is important to take into account the balance of these tasks in a language learning (Nation, 2007). Additionally, the grammatical precision is often the main emphasis of the learning process, while giving little attention to the oral fluency skills (Funk, 2012). The findings of this study give information to the teachers about how to choose the appropriate coursebooks to utilize in classrooms from the perspective of the Four Strands. This current study also contributes to the material design and development in English Language Studies by providing the perspective of how learning tasks in coursebooks should be.

Figure 5. A language-focused learning task

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, New Total English Coursebooks provide equal opportunities for learners in terms of the Four Strands because no strand was found dominant. Meaning-focused input has the highest frequency of strand in the learning tasks with 335 (28.08%), fluency development strand has the second highest frequency with 326 (25.79%) learning tasks. The language-focused strand occupies 298 (23.57%) learning tasks, while the mearning-focused output strand occupies 285 (22.54%) of the learning tasks.

The learning tasks may be used and followed by general adult learners, who are the coursebooks' intended users, to accomplish learning objectives. The coursebooks analysed in this current study can be used as a reference for language coursebook designers as the coursebooks provide equal distributions of the four strands. Finally, future studies that analyze the learning tasks in coursebooks can use the current work as a reference in conducting their studies. The current study's researchers suggest that future studies examine different general language learning coursebooks to determine how the four strands are distributed throughout the books. Lastly, the researchers suggest English instrutors use the coursebooks analysed in this study to be used in classrooms since they are proven to provide equal proportions of the Four Strands.

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