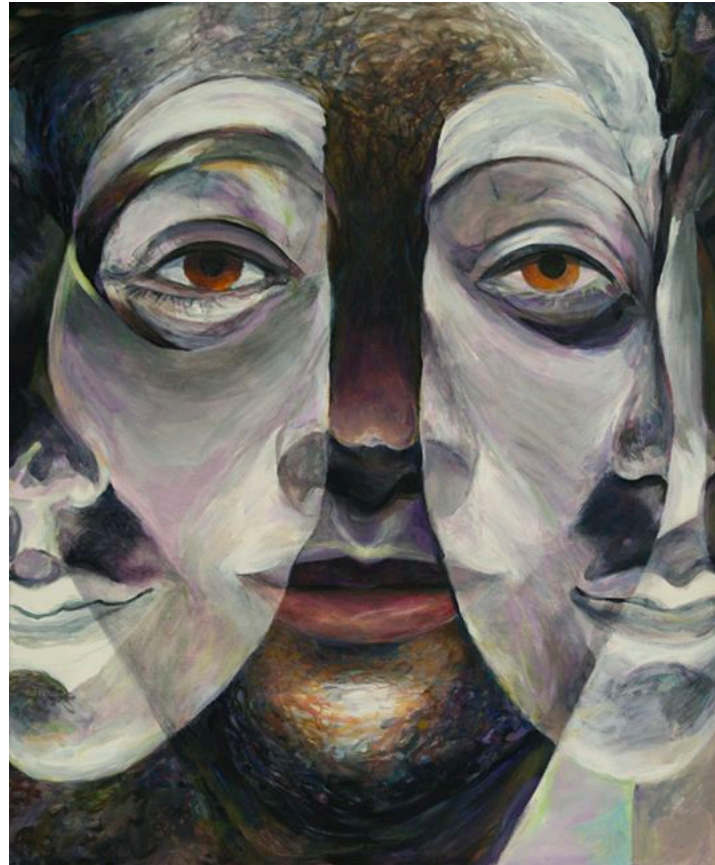# The Psychology of Assessment: Informing best practice in EAP assessment through insights into positive psychology

The Future of English Language Teaching

Regent's University June 15th 2019

Alex Thorp

Lead Academic – Language (Europe)

How are you?

What did you bring with you today…..?

The depth factor

No one best method – "Success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more **on what goes on inside and between people in the classroom**"

Stevick 1980

Only learner knows the experience of learning and assessment, whether it is engaging and has meaning. Teachers should facilitate a psychological environment conducive to meaningful experiences that will enable learning.
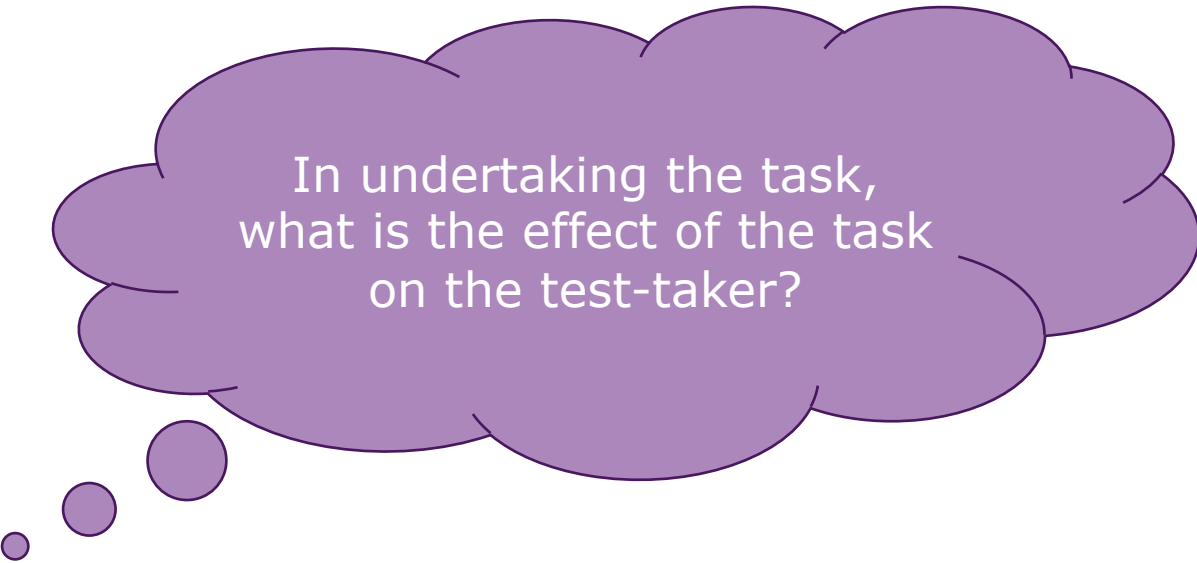
Outline

- Assessment tasks in EAP

- Contemporary background (testing and psychology)

- Key areas of educational psychology
             Groups, emotions, beliefs, self-concept

- Does EAP assessment engage the test-taker?

- Introducing Positive Psychology frameworks

- Audit – are tests / items fit for purpose?

- Summary

EAP assessment tasks

- With a partner - choose a macro-skill (S/L/R/W)
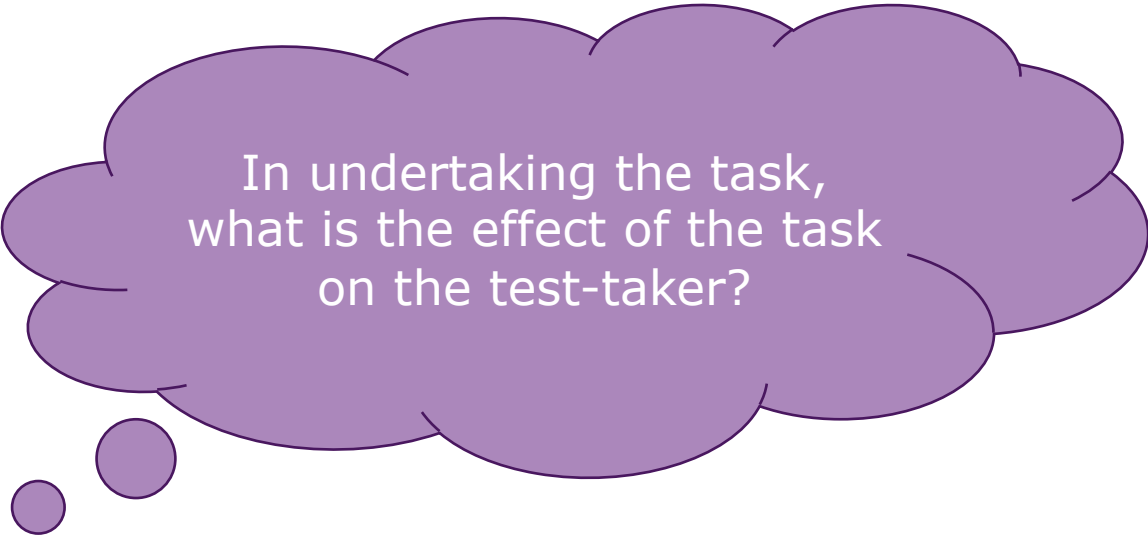- Consider a commonly used assessment task (summative)

In undertaking the task, what is the effect of the task on the test-taker?

EAP assessment tasks – recognise these?

- **Talk** about an experience (in monologue to a computer)
- **Listen** and answer multiple choice questions about what you're listening to
- **Read** aloud (to a computer)
- **Listen** and repeat sentences
- **Listen** to a recording and select the correct answers
- **Listen** and write the correct answers
- **Read** and select true, false *or* not given
- **Speak** about a topic you are given after one minute's thinking time (for that topic)
- **Talk** about [2 out of 3] pictures for one minute
- *Transform* sentences using knowledge of *grammar/syntax*
- **Write** about, and compare, graphs/charts

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EAP assessment tasks

- With a partner - choose a macro-skill (S/L/R/W)
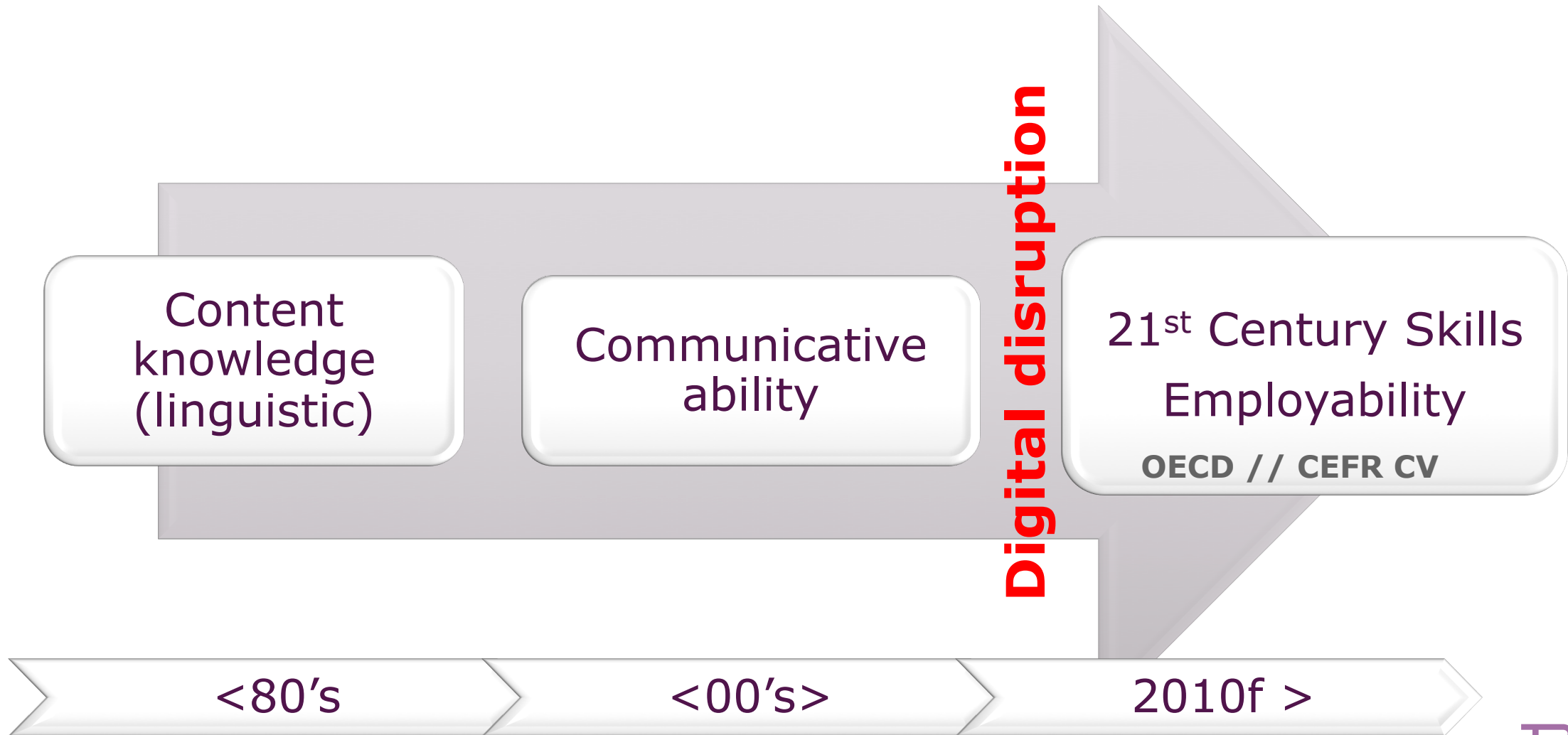- Consider a commonly used assessment task (summative)

In undertaking the task, what is the effect of the task on the test-taker?

- How did you answer?
- Did you review the task positively?
- What framework of reference did you use?

Background: contemporary approaches to test design and test-taker psychology:

Background - Shifting pedagogical paradigm

Content knowledge (linguistic)

Communicative ability

Digital disruption

21st Century Skills Employability
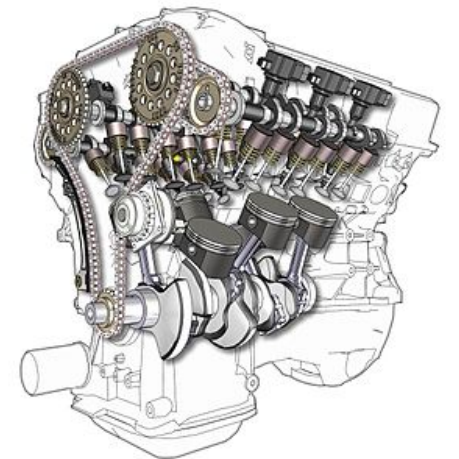
OECD // CEFR CV

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WASHBACK

Tests influence what and how teachers teach, and what and how students learn. (Hughes 1993. Bailey 1996. Wall 1997)

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Assessment and learning

Research emphasis on the function of assessment as a principle driver of student learning (Al-Kadri 2013; Cowan and Cherry 2012; Garrison and Ehringhaus 2007; Guskey 2003; Stiggins 2002).

➢'Assessment drives learning' (Miller 1990)

➢'Assessment is the engine that drives learning' (Cowan 2005)

Learner resources

Test consequences

Test taker

Contextual parameters

Cognitive processes

Placing the individual test taker at the heart of the language testing agenda.

(O'Sullivan 2011)

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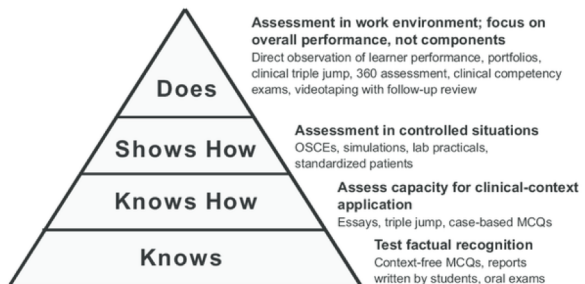
Contemporary assessment: Socio-cognitive framework
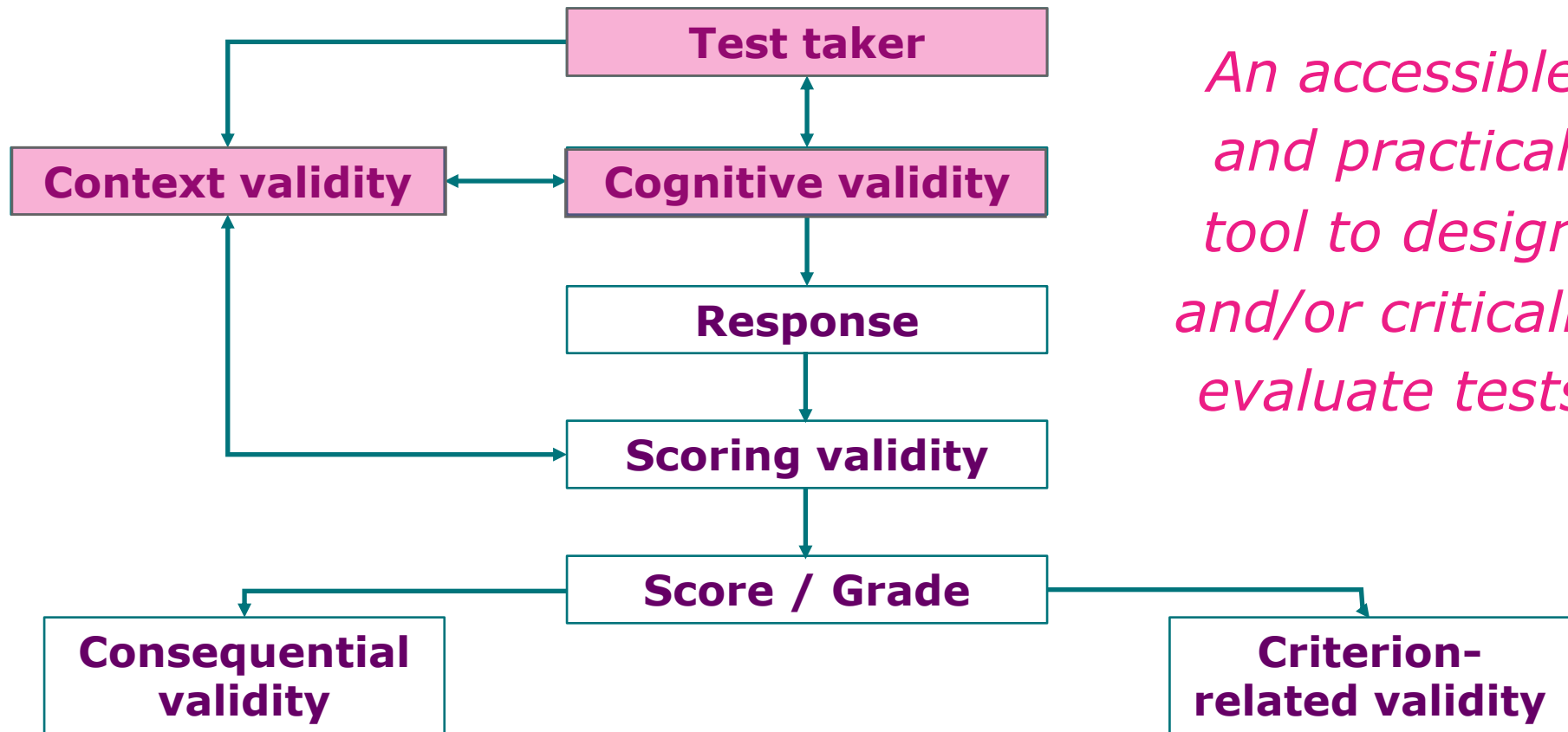
Test taker

Context validity → Cognitive validity

Response

Scoring validity

Score / Grade

Consequential validity

Criterion-related validity

An accessible and practical tool to design and/or critically evaluate tests

(Weir 2005f)
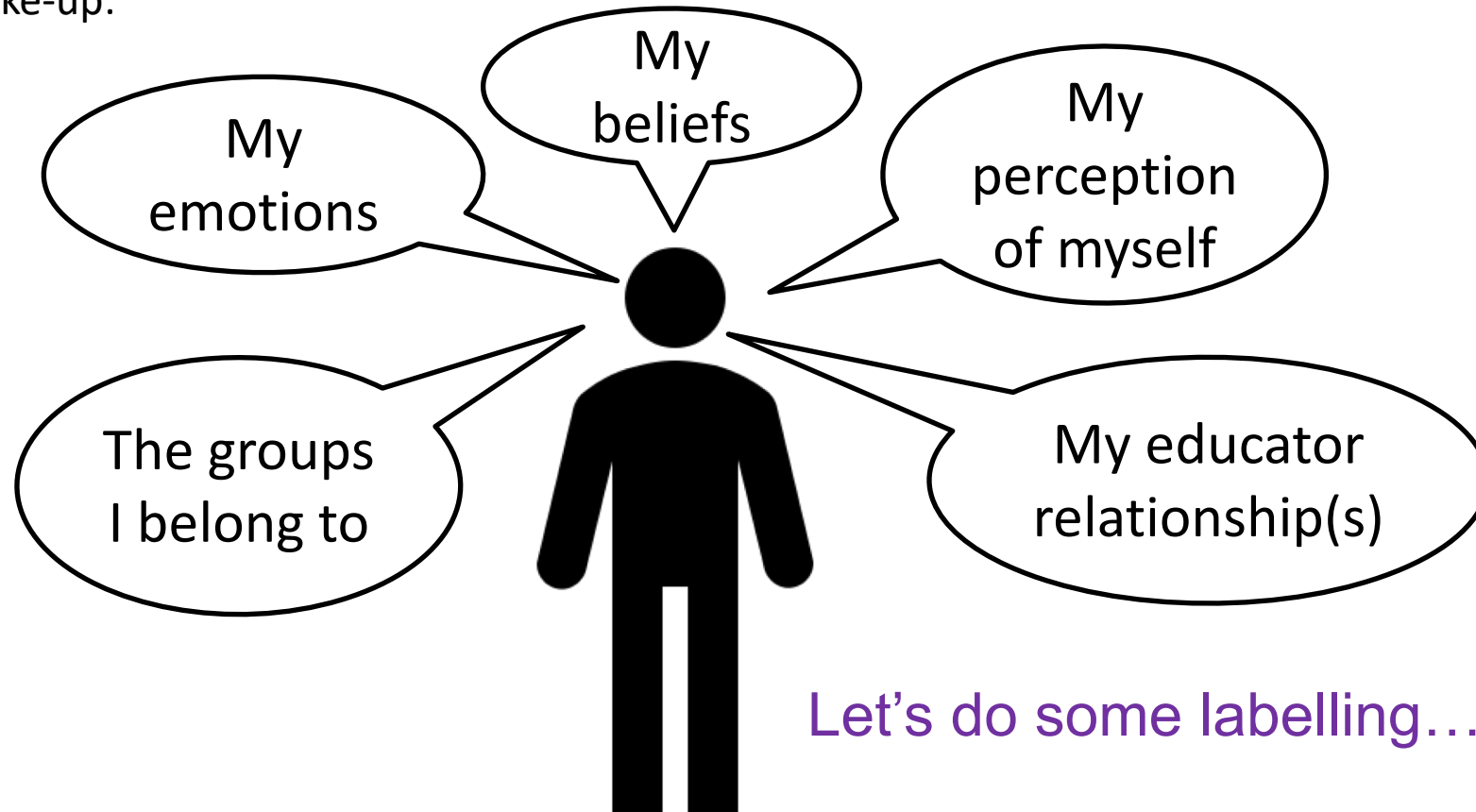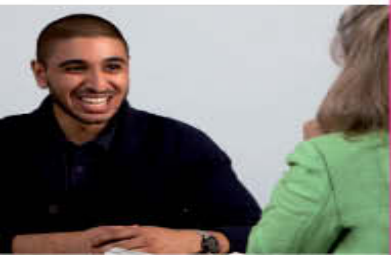
The psychology landscape

The educational psychology landscape

Behaviourist
'Conditioning / stimulus response – e.g. audio lingual'

Skinner: reinforcement

Sociocultivist

Socioculturalist
'Individual in collaboration, learning a social process'

Vygotsky: learning through social interaction – role of scaffolding
-Communication is key
-Influence of context

Cognitivist

Humanist
'Holistic – feeling emotional'

Maslow: Hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation
Rogers: fully functioning person
Hamachek: learning = identity
Stevick: 'what goes on inside and between…'

Information Processing
Working memory

Baddeley: Phonological loop

Constructivist
Construct meaning from experience

Piaget: assimilation / accommodation
Bruner: personal construct theory
Kelly: Construct from hypothesis
Salmon: Social constructivism

The educational psychology landscape

Complexity perspective

'Individual and context, the learner in the environment – highly complex'

Gibson: The person and the context – affordances
Lier: interconnections between learner, their perceptions, actions and contexts
-Recognition of complexity, futility of prescriptions
-Complex systems interact and are in flux

So, onto our learners…

Your learners' psychological make-up
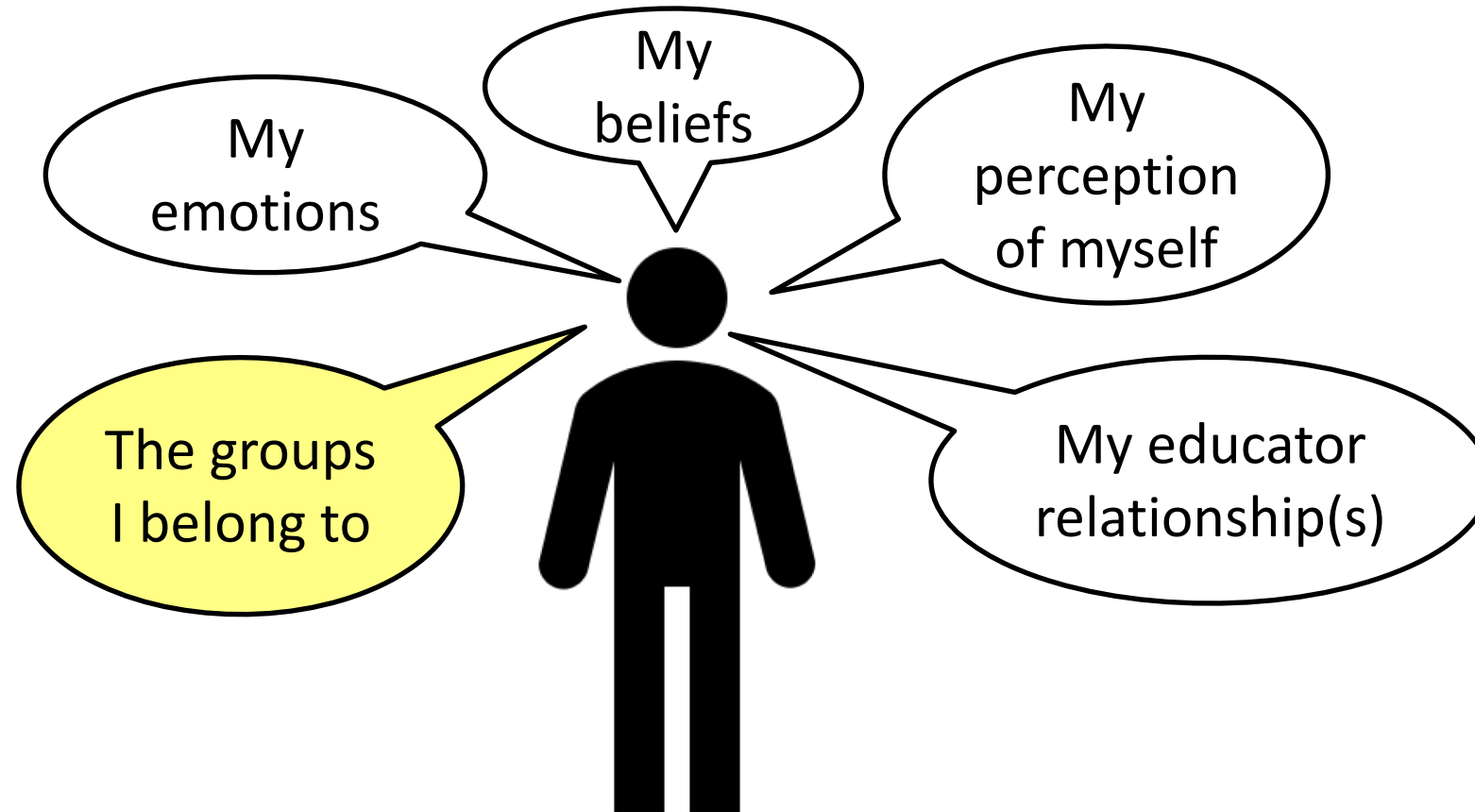
Individual contextual systems

National culture

Local community

School / class

Family

Learner

Davis & Sumara 2006
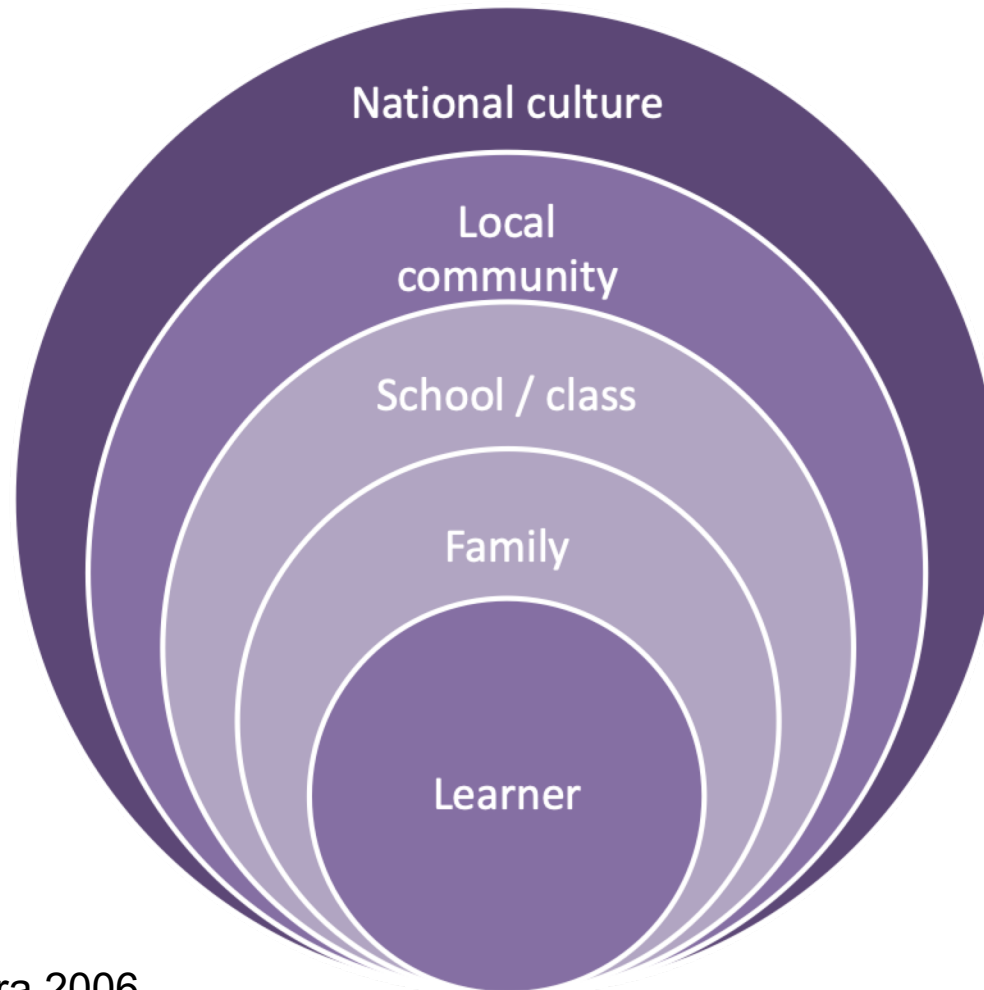
- Membership not static
- Experience through lens of groups / cultures to define personal culture
- Group member dissonance

'Every learner has their unique personal set of cultures that they bring with them to the classroom' (Holiday 1994)

As teachers we need to facilitate learner's reconciliation of their membership of the class group with their other groups.

What assumptions are made about test-takers' group memberships?

Your learners' psychological make-up
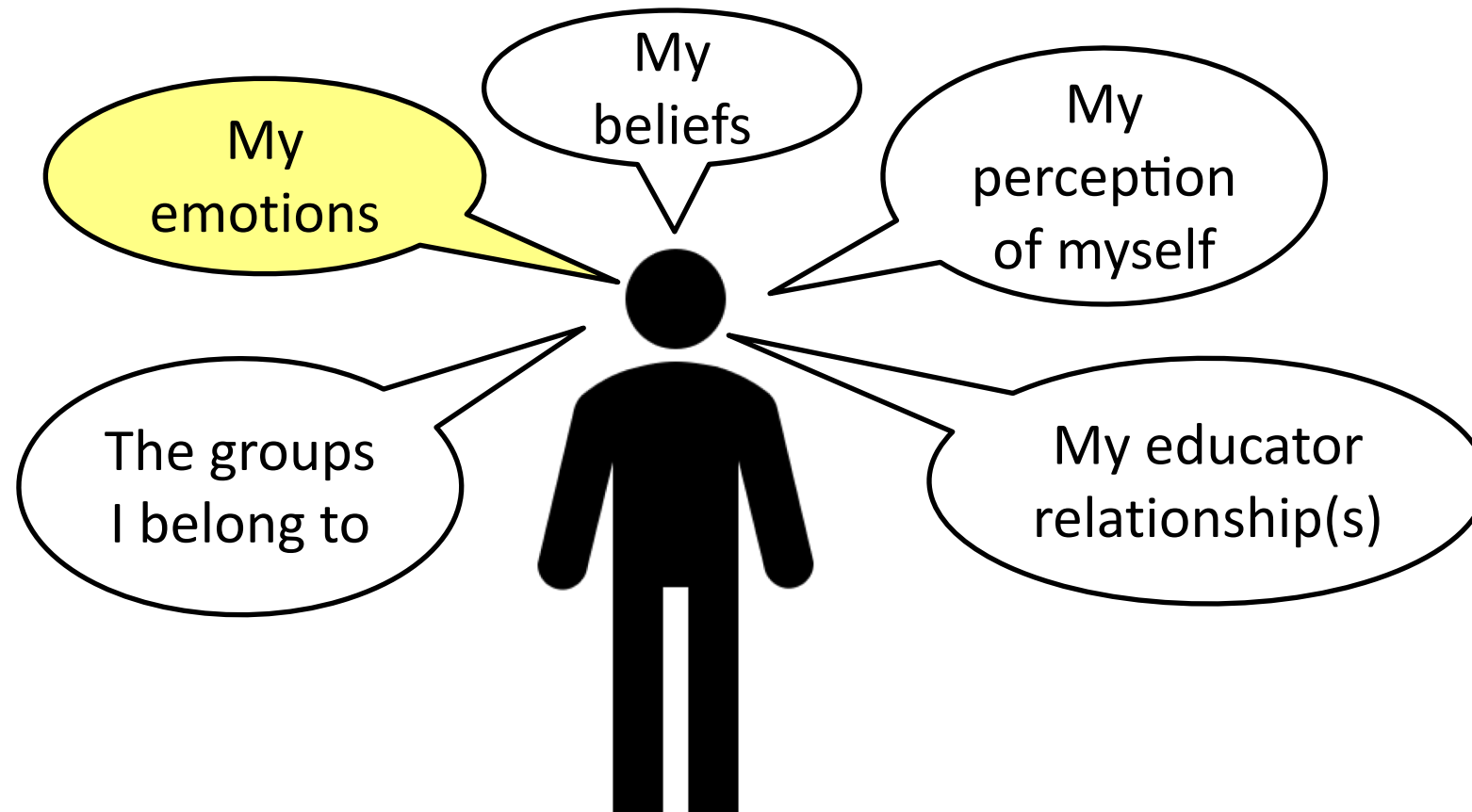
My emotions - affective response

- Negative emotions – inhibit learning (Krashen – affective filter)

- Positive emotions – enhance learning (more creative, resilient to stress, build positive relationships…)

Flow – utterly absorbed in learning (Csikszentmihalyi 1990)

Meaning – greater meaning than self-gratification (Seligman et al 2009)

Positive and negative emotions underlie motivation for L2 learning (MacIntyre 2017)

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Positive affective experience
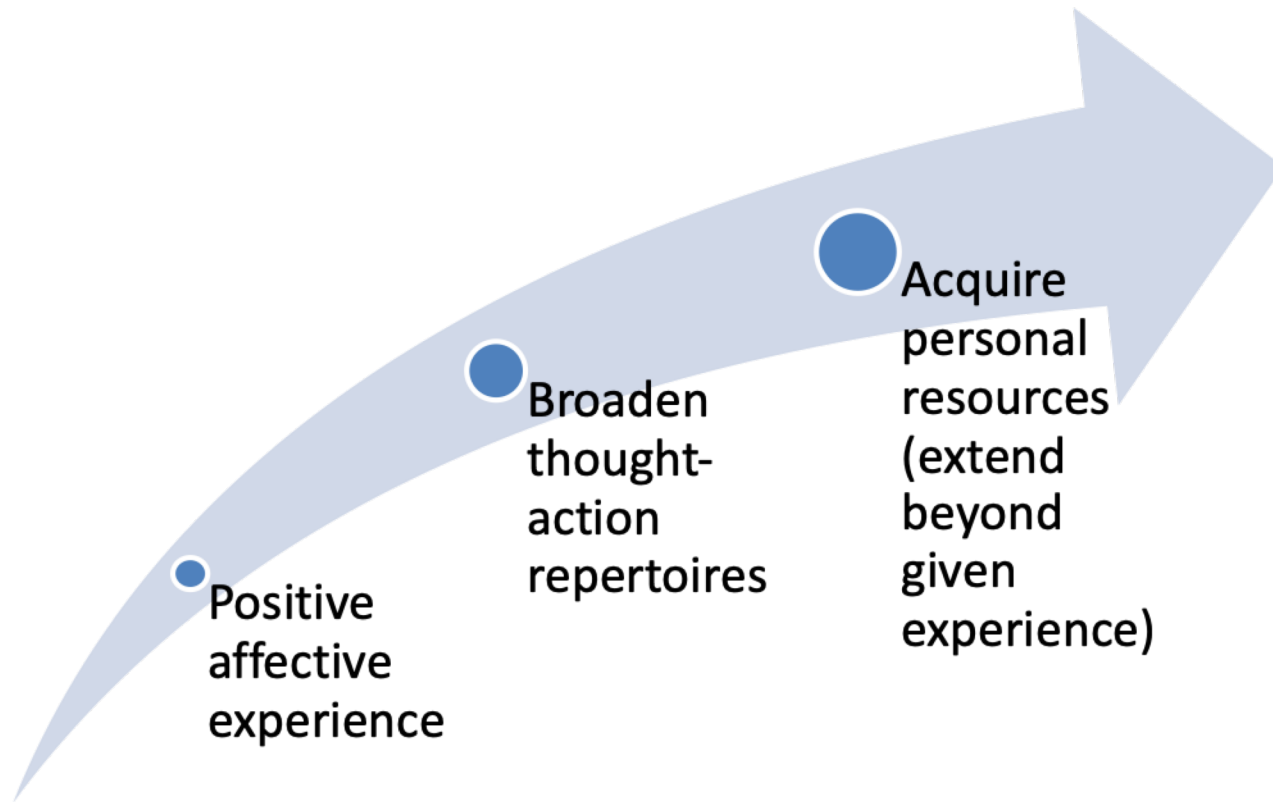
- increase learning potential
- techniques for coping and resiliency
- formation of adaptive spirals (feeling, thinking, acting)

Positive affective experience → Broaden thought-action repertoires → Acquire personal resources (extend beyond given experience)

Gregersen et al 2016

Results in the building of **social capital**

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Negative affective experience

Negative affective experience

Narrow thought-action repertoires

Reduce personal resources (extend beyond given experience)

- Self-protective techniques
- Limiting participation
- Avoid collaboration
- Interpersonal distortions

(e.g. language anxiety, test anxiety, anger, frustration etc.)

Gregersen et al 2016

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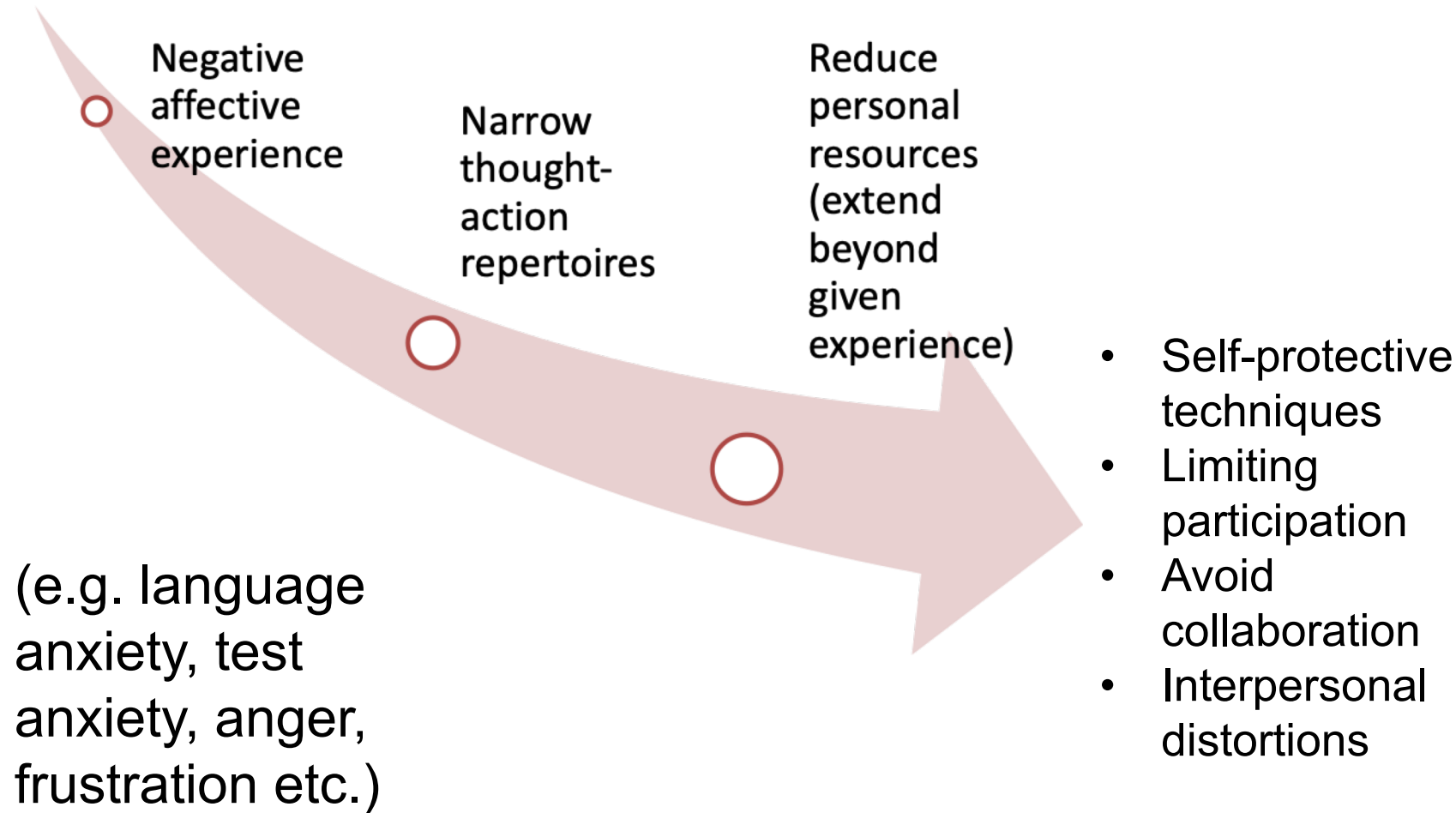
Your learners' psychological make-up

Activity

Role play with a partner – A and B

A: A B1 level **student** experiencing limited progress and poor test results

B: English **teacher** running a general English course

A: (student) – Please look away / close your eyes

B: (teacher) – Your objective is to find out why the student is not progressing as much as they would like.

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Categorising beliefs

Belief

	Facilitative	Debilitative
Epistemological		
Implicit (mindset)		
Attributions		

My teacher isn't very good…
I'm bad at learning languages and exams…I'm not as intelligent as others…
I don't know enough grammar, I need more to improve my speaking…
The test is too difficult, I need to repeat the lower level classes..
I'm too shy to talk opening in a test
I only speak/write when I know I won't make a mistake

Fixed mindset (Entity theory)
Growth mindset (Incremental theory)

Dweck 2006

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Belief systems & the facilitating teacher

Audit beliefs of self and learners → Understand impact of beliefs → Promote facilitating beliefs
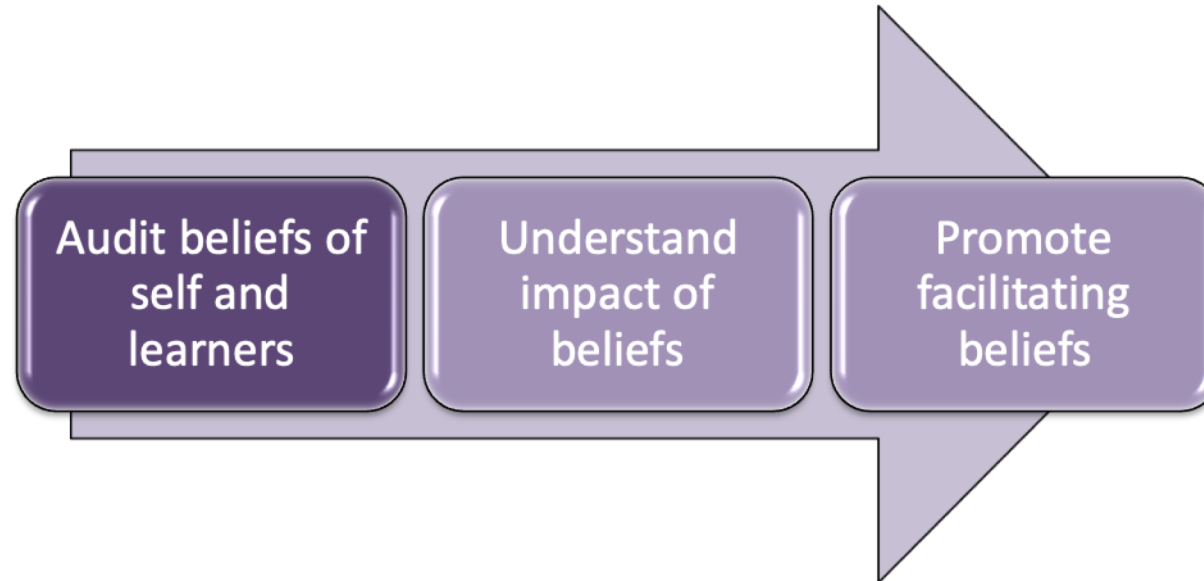
- Beliefs can change - Peripheral beliefs more pliable
- Teachers influence beliefs (esp. surrounding learning)
- Can generate a culture of beliefs that optimize learning

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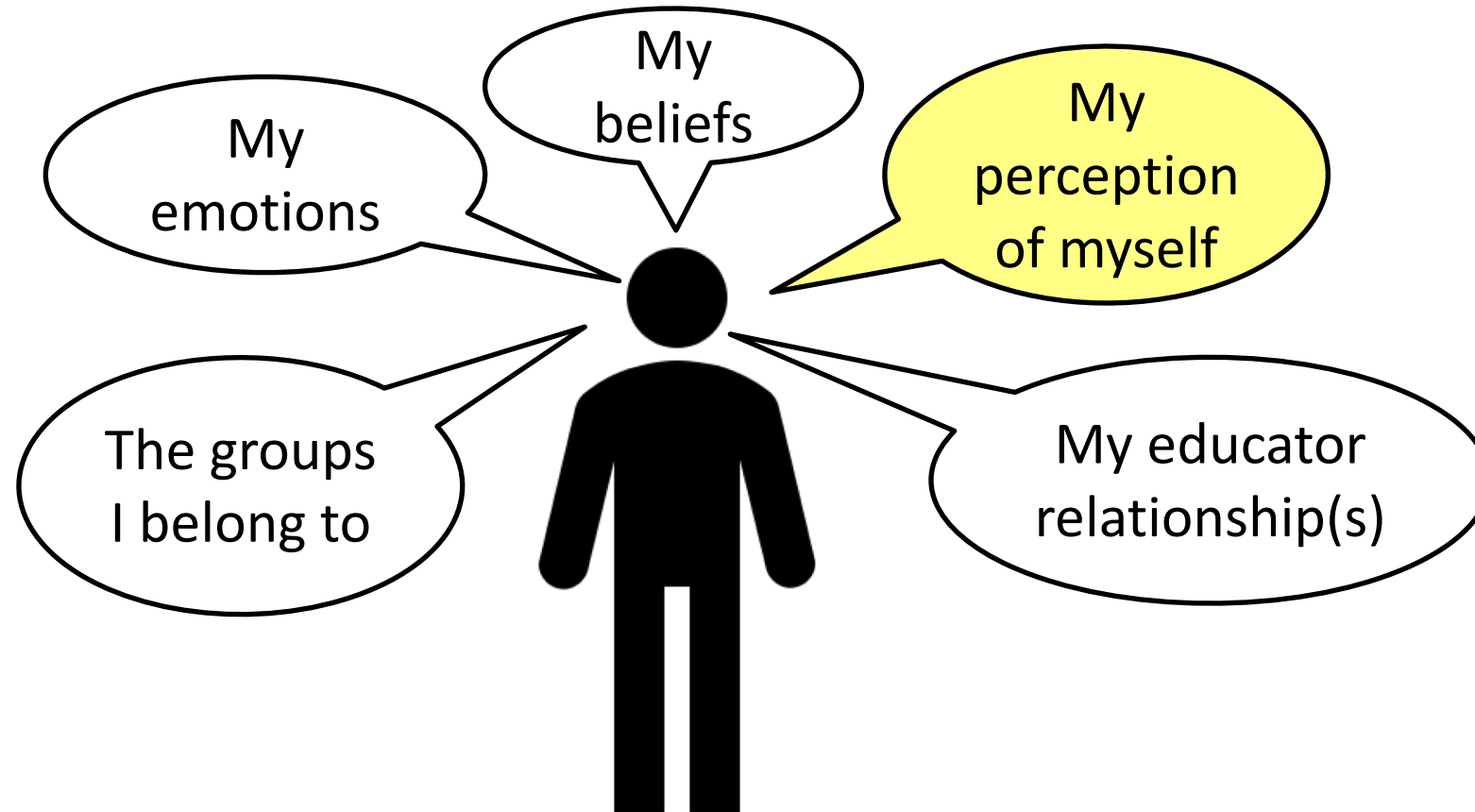
Self – key terms

Self-efficacy

Self-concept

Self-esteem

Identity

Self-efficacy — Evaluation of one's own ability to do something specific successfully

Self-concept — Attitude towards own ability/ competence at a global level

Self-esteem — Overall affective evaluation of self – emotional and holistic

Identity — View of self in relation to specific context or group

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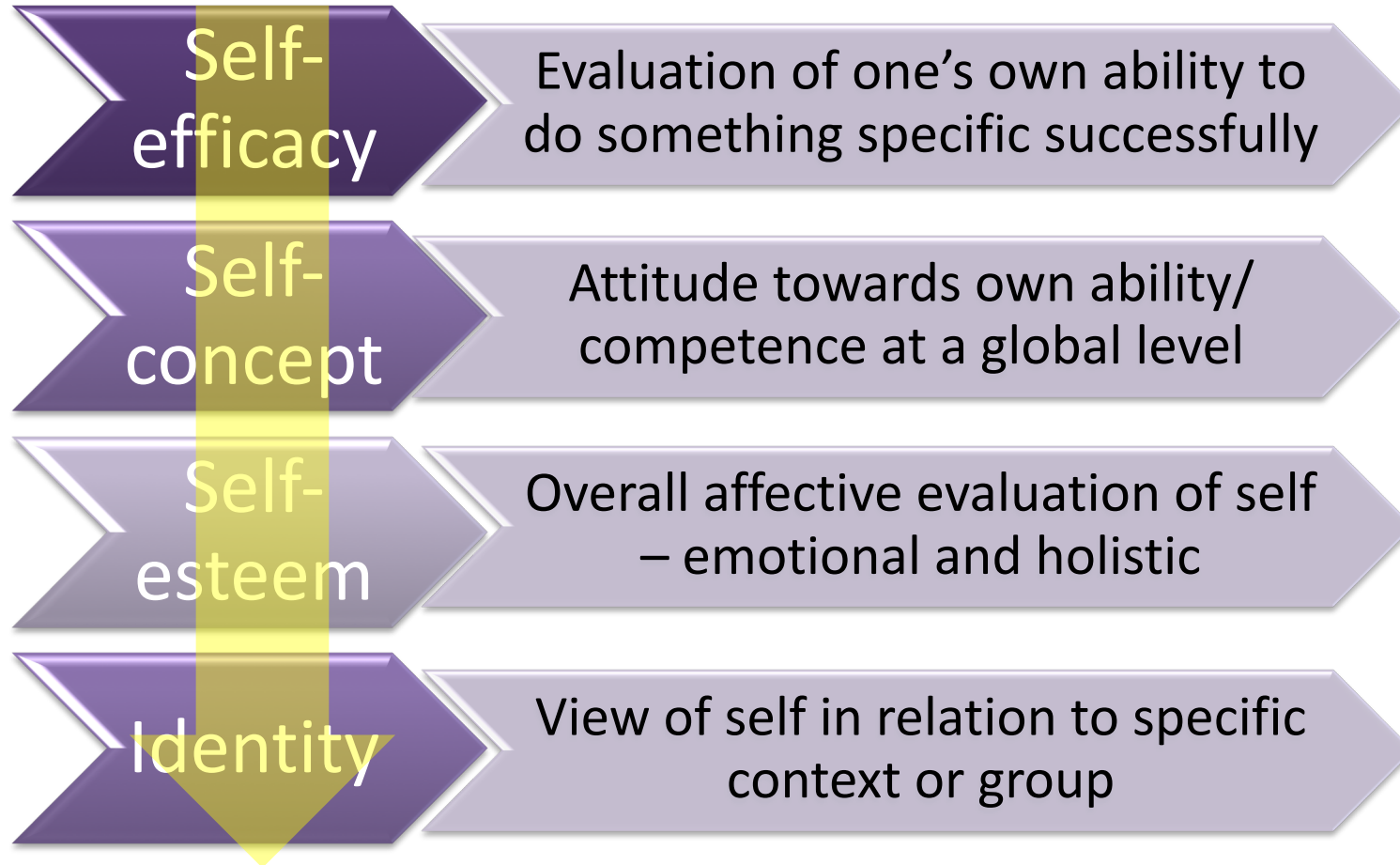
Influence on outlook and behavior

Use of strategies

Self regulation

Willingness to communicate

Emotion / anxiety

Sense of agency

SELF

Motivation

Position in a group

A cognitive self construct that relates to competence and achievement – An objective truth?

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The coherent Self
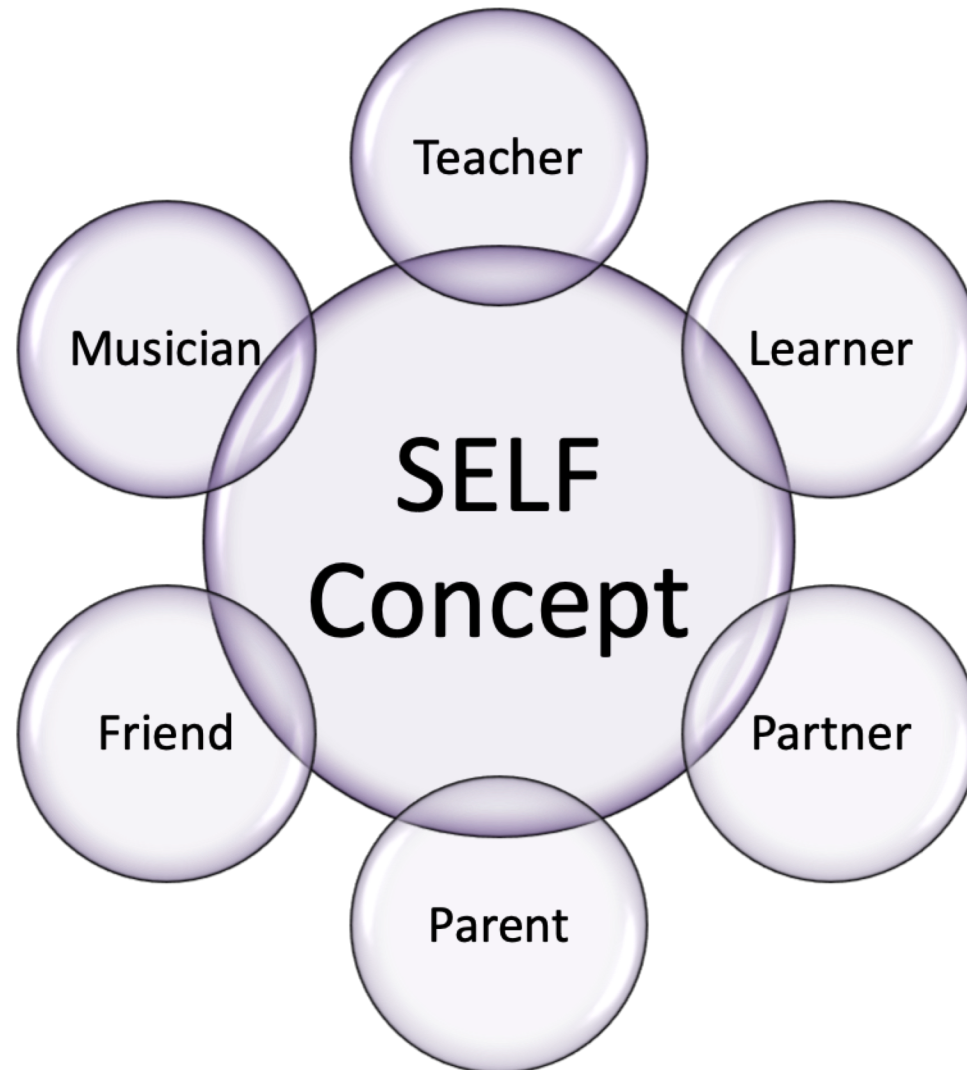
- The localised perception of self directly influences behaviour
- How do these 'identities' interact?
- Which are in L1 / L2 or blended
- What happens when there is dissonance?
- Which 'Self' do you bring to the testing experience?

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Your (test-taker's) psychological make-up

My beliefs

My emotions

My perception of myself

The groups I belong to

My educator relationship(s)
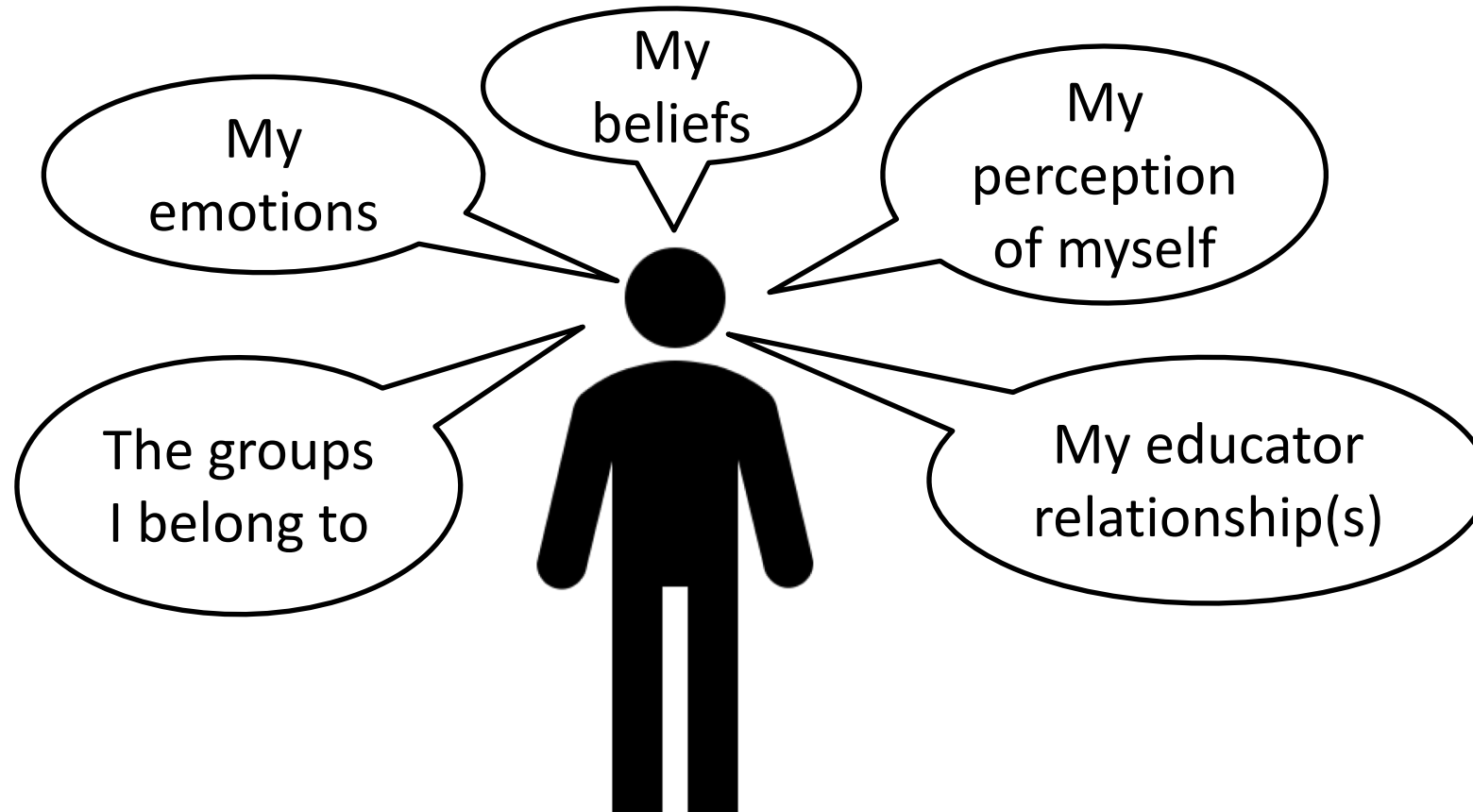
Whilst we claim to place the test-taker at the centre of the test – do we really engage the person as a psychological being?

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Questions from psychology – assessment tasks

What do learners attribute success / failure to?

What do learners believe about their ability?

How competent do learners feel they are?

How do learners compare themselves to others?

How motivated are learners to interact in the task?

What emotions does using the language elicit?

What mood are learners in when assessed?
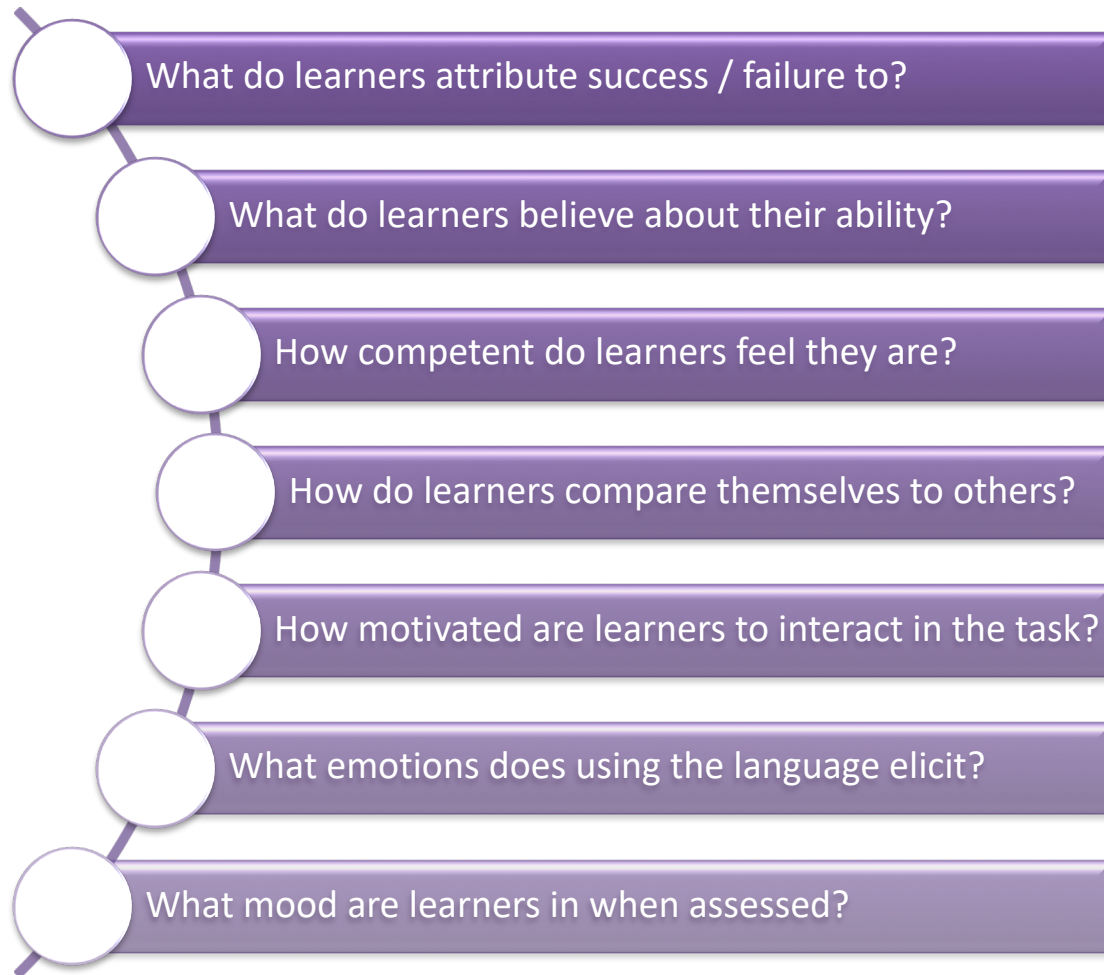
How do your learners describe their assessment experience?

Assessment practices frequently alienate and intimidate learners, leading to high levels of anxiety, and as a direct result, diminished performances.

A paradigm shift in educational psychology….

Williams et al 2015

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Positive psychology in language assessment

What is positive psychology?

"... the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life.   Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000

"... Positive psychology has an added dimension of practice and application that can further inform both the teacher and learner development sides of SLA.

McIntyre et al 2016

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Insights into positive psychology
PERMA model (Seligman 2011) applied to assessment

Learners actively engaged in meaningful tasks – a co-constructed discourse relating to the individual

Tasks require authentic interaction with interlocutor building a communicative relationship

Setting at ease and personalisation together with genuine interest in learner lead to a positive affective experience – scope for formative feedback
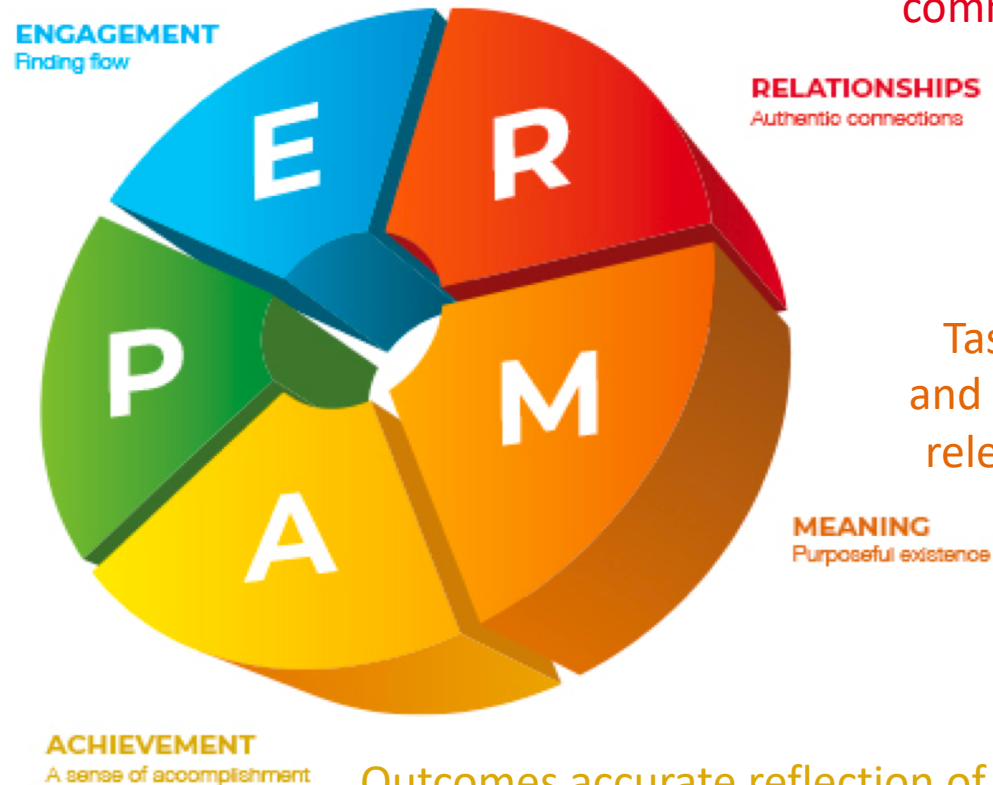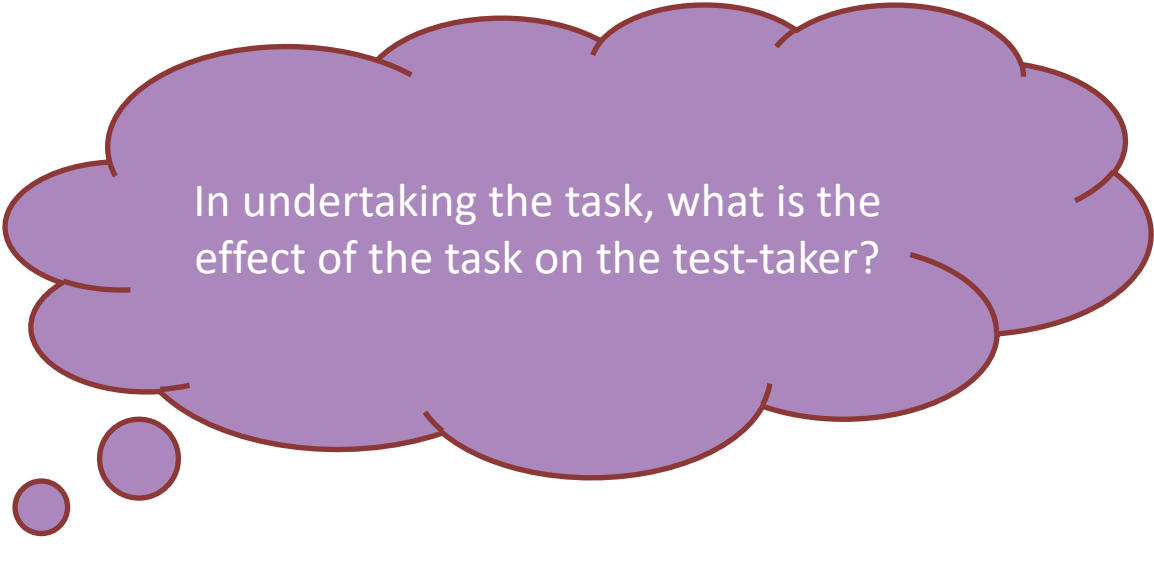
Tasks reflect real-world use and give genuine meaning and relevance to life of candidate

ENGAGEMENT
Finding flow

RELATIONSHIPS
Authentic connections

POSITIVE EMOTIONS
Feeling good

MEANING
Purposeful existence

ACHIEVEMENT
A sense of accomplishment

P E R M A

Outcomes accurate reflection of learners achievement in a linguistic performance – including formative feedback

PERMA model - Seligman 2011

EAP assessment tasks

- With a partner - choose a macro-skill (S/L/R/W)
- Consider a commonly used assessment task (summative)

In undertaking the task, what is the effect of the task on the test-taker?

Did the tasks you thought of engage the learner as a psychological entity? Or alienate?

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Insights into positive psychology (PERMA 2011)
PERMA model applied to assessment

	Given topic to give monologic performance	Select personal topic for dialogic discussion
Positive emotion		
personalisation and genuine interest in learner (empathy)		
Engagement		
actively engaged in meaningful tasks		
Relationship		
authentic interaction with interlocutor building a communicative relationship		
Meaning		
Tasks reflect real-world use giving genuine meaning and relevance		
Accomplishment		
learners achievement acknowledged in a linguistic performance		

Insights into positive psychology (PERMA 2011)
PERMA model applied to assessment

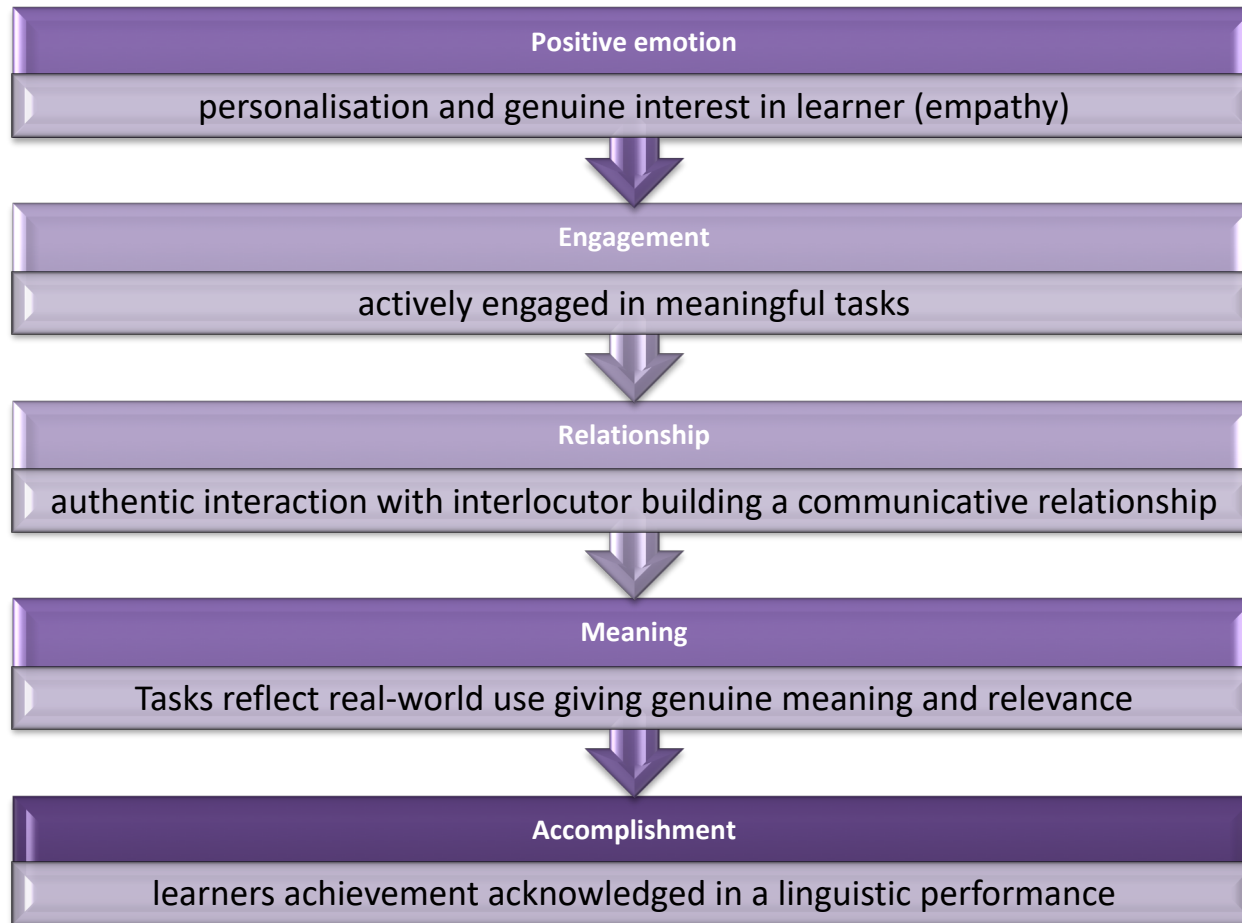|	Given topic to give monologic performance	Select personal topic for dialogic discussion
Positive emotion — personalisation and genuine interest in learner (empathy)	✖ / ?	✔
Engagement — actively engaged in meaningful tasks	✖ / ?	✔
Relationship — authentic interaction with interlocutor building a communicative relationship	✖ / ?	✔
Meaning — Tasks reflect real-world use giving genuine meaning and relevance	✖ / ?	✔
Accomplishment — learners achievement acknowledged in a linguistic performance	✔	✔

Emotion & empathy

Meaning & motivation

Perseverance

Agency & autonomy

Time

Hardiness

Intelligences

Character strengths

Self-factors

'EMPATHICS is an acronym outlining important psychological forces that help learners achieve high well-being and progress rapidly, develop proficiency, and relish the language learning experience' (Oxford 2016)

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Summary – The psychology of assessment

Testing: move towards centrality of test-taker → Awareness of learner as psychological entity → Contemporary psychology models inform practice → Assessment to engage psychological individual → Test-taker: fulfills true potential in performance

Not about a feel-good 'happiology' – rather authentic engagement with the test-taker as a psychological individual to facilitate the best possible performance in a test task.

Models available to audit tests and items – are they fit for purpose?
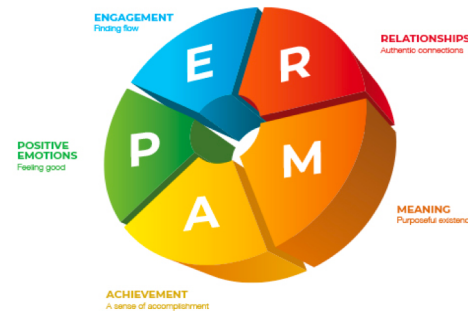
Summary -Insights from positive psychology
Language assessment – key points

Underlying ethos places **test-taker at the heart** of the test - the entire 'psychological' self

Personalisation aids candidate performance = learner agency

Authenticity of task (cognitive validity) generates meaning and value

Bias for best – setting at ease and seeking what candidate can do

Learner **beliefs** around testing can be adapted to enhance performance / aligned to ethos
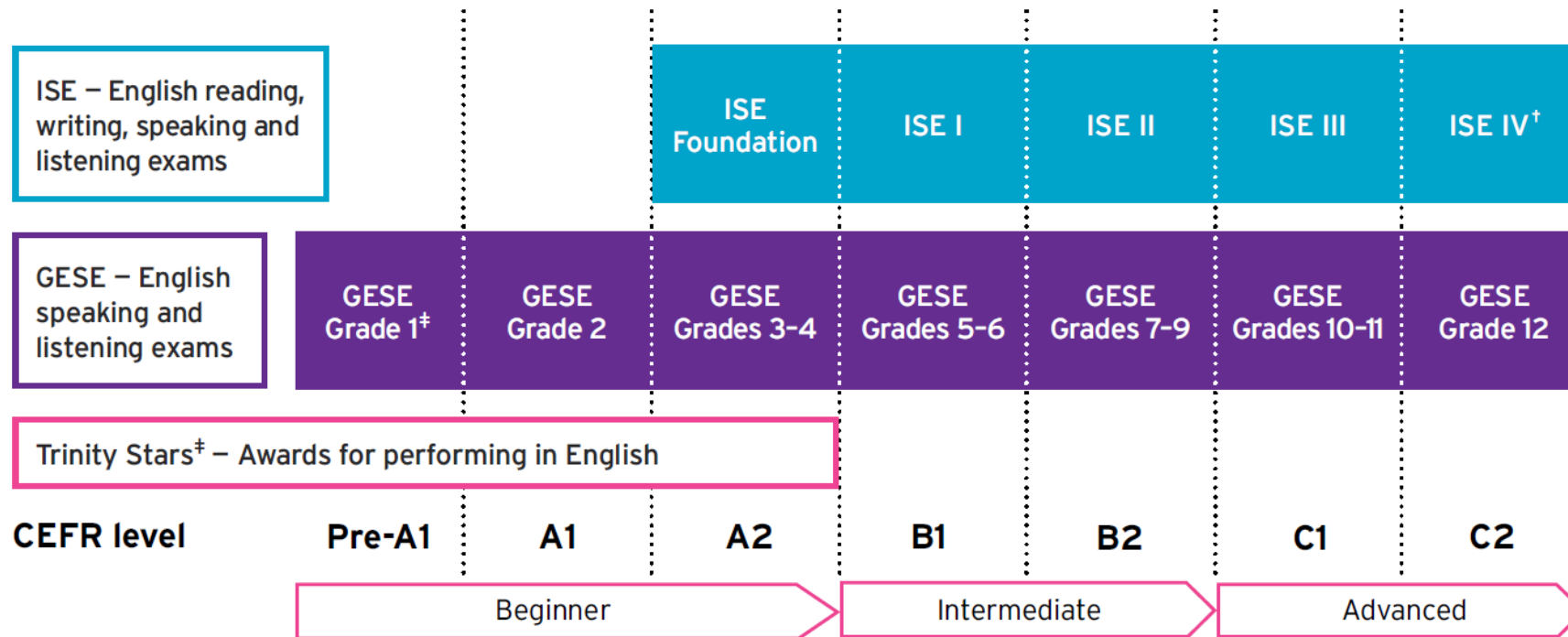
Testing a **positive affective experience** as relational and co-constructed (ownership)

Stakeholders should seek **positive washback** – tests that teach the whole learner

Best assessment practices embrace learner well being

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Trinity – A communicative pathway

Personalisation in every task

ISE – English reading, writing, speaking and listening exams			ISE Foundation	ISE I	ISE II	ISE III	ISE IV[†]
GESE – English speaking and listening exams	GESE Grade 1[‡]	GESE Grade 2	GESE Grades 3–4	GESE Grades 5–6	GESE Grades 7–9	GESE Grades 10–11	GESE Grade 12
Trinity Stars[‡] – Awards for performing in English							
CEFR level	Pre-A1	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
	Beginner			Intermediate		Advanced	

[†]ISE IV (C2) has a different format | [‡]Not mapped to the CEFR | CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference

CEFR = Common European Framework of reference

The Psychology of Assessment: Informing best practice in EAP assessment through insights into positive psychology

Q & A

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