

# “Curricularizing” Language: Combatting Systems of Exclusion To Promote Equity

---

GUADALUPE VALDÉS  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

In this presentation, I am going to talk about:

---

# Language



Multilingual children. [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com)

# I will:

---

Talk about the process of “curricularizing” language and the interacting mechanisms involved in that process

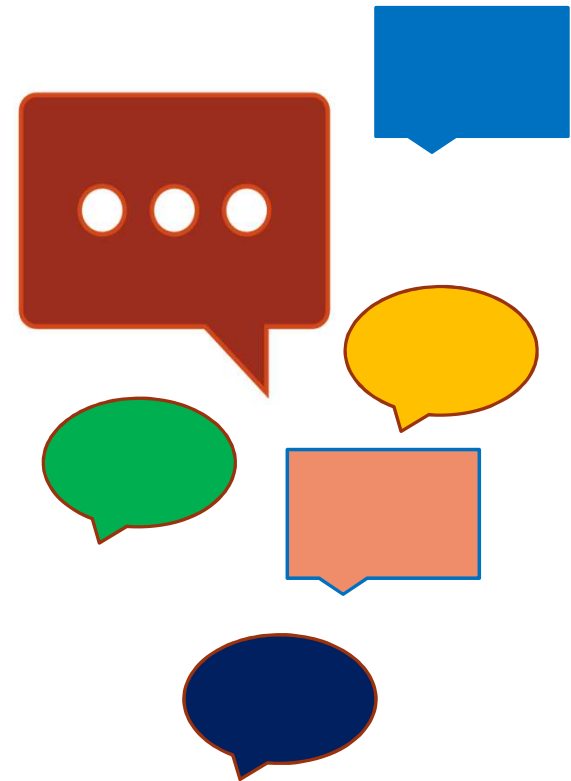
Invite you to consider why language is not an ordinary school subject that can be curricularized easily or successfully

Conclude with an example of possibilities for supporting **English language development-for equity**--by describing current work on the *integration* of language and content.

# I will say a quite a bit about

---

The ways that we **see** and **hear** language in the field of education.



# As we get started, I want you to consider the following questions:

---

- What if the ways that we think and talk about language are wrong?
- What if our views about good and bad English actually reflect our perspectives on the racial and ethnic characteristics of the speakers?
- What if drilling new learners of English on vocabulary and grammatical structures does not help them use the language in order to learn?
- What if English language proficiency (ELP) assessments can only tell us where a student scores with reference to the hypothesized sequence of development on which the state assessment is based?

I have recently suggested (Valdés, 2017, 2018, 2019; Valdés & Parra, 2018) that the “teaching” of “languages”

---

involves the process of language  
*curricularization.*

## When *language* is curricularized,

---

It is treated, not as a species-unique communicative system acquired naturally in the process of primary socialization, but as a curricular subject, a **body of knowledge** or a **skill** the elements of which can be

- ordered and sequenced,
- practiced and studied,
- learned and tested in artificial contexts within which learners of the target language outnumber proficient speakers (Wong-Fillmore, 1991,1992)

# As we focus on equity for EL-categorized students:

---

We need to be able to

- compare,
- contrast,
- evaluate

the multiple activities that now count as “language teaching.”



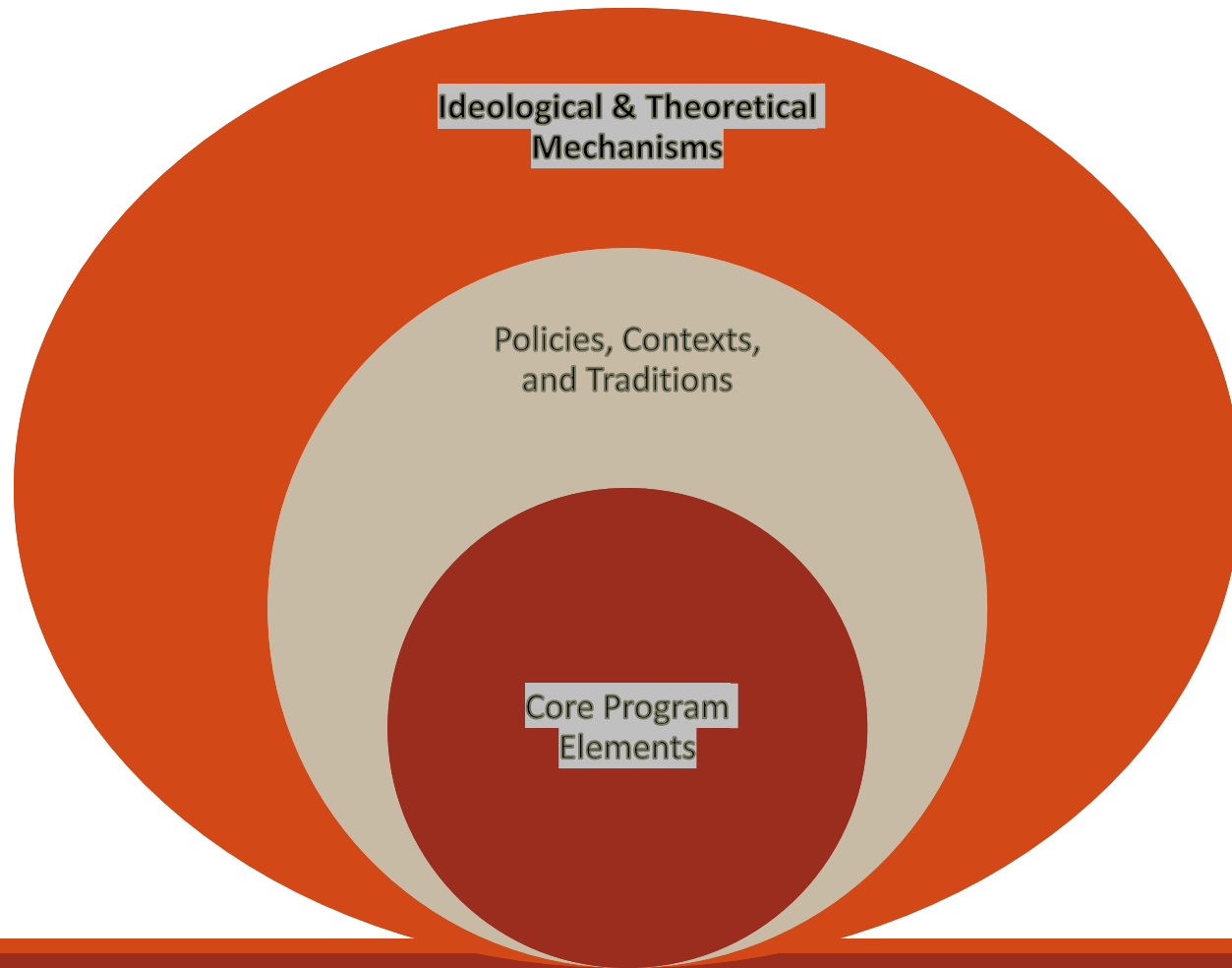
The process of curricularizing language,  
then:

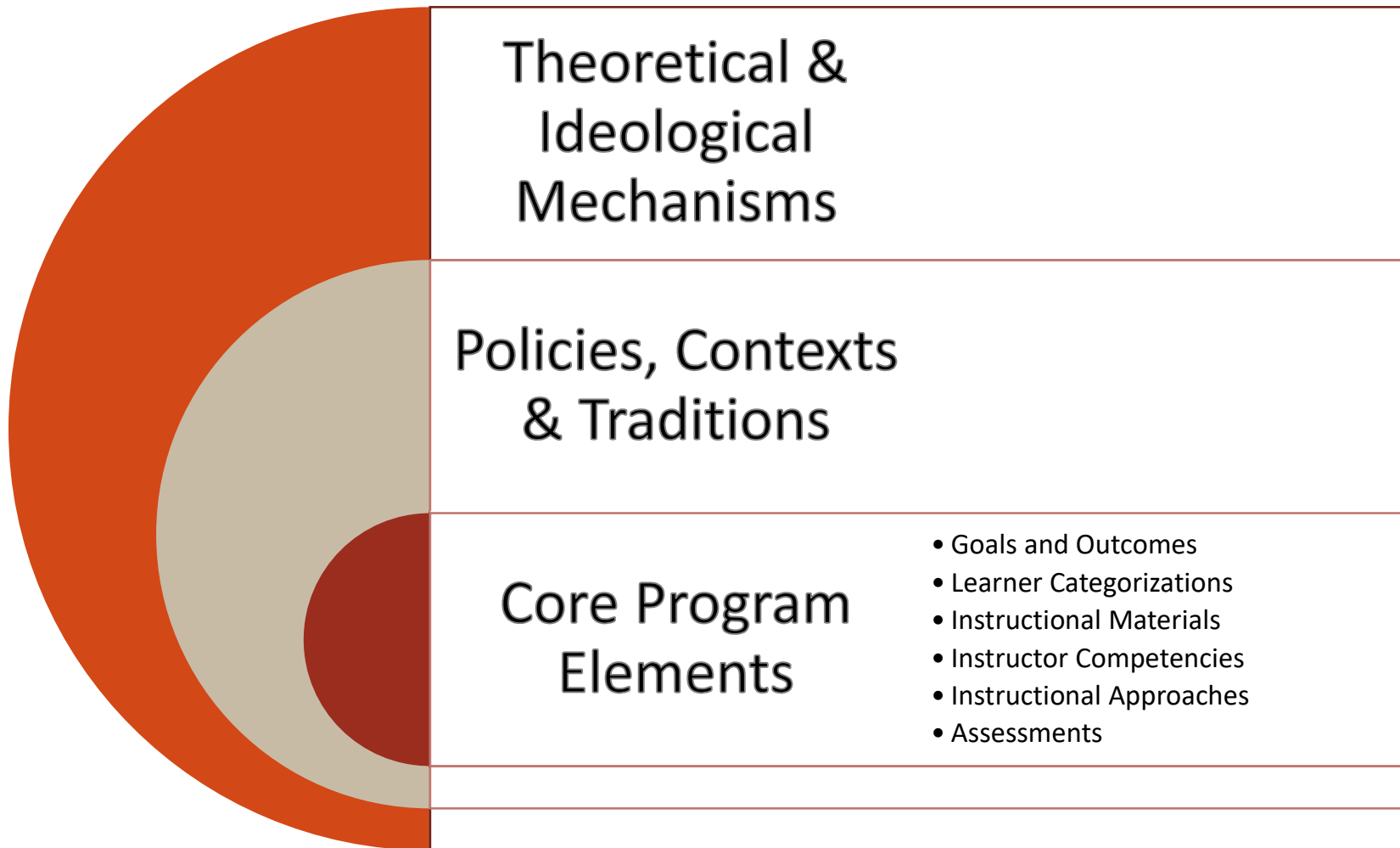
---

Involves a series of interacting mechanisms  
and elements all of which function as a part  
of a complex system that can be thought of  
as a set of concentric circles.

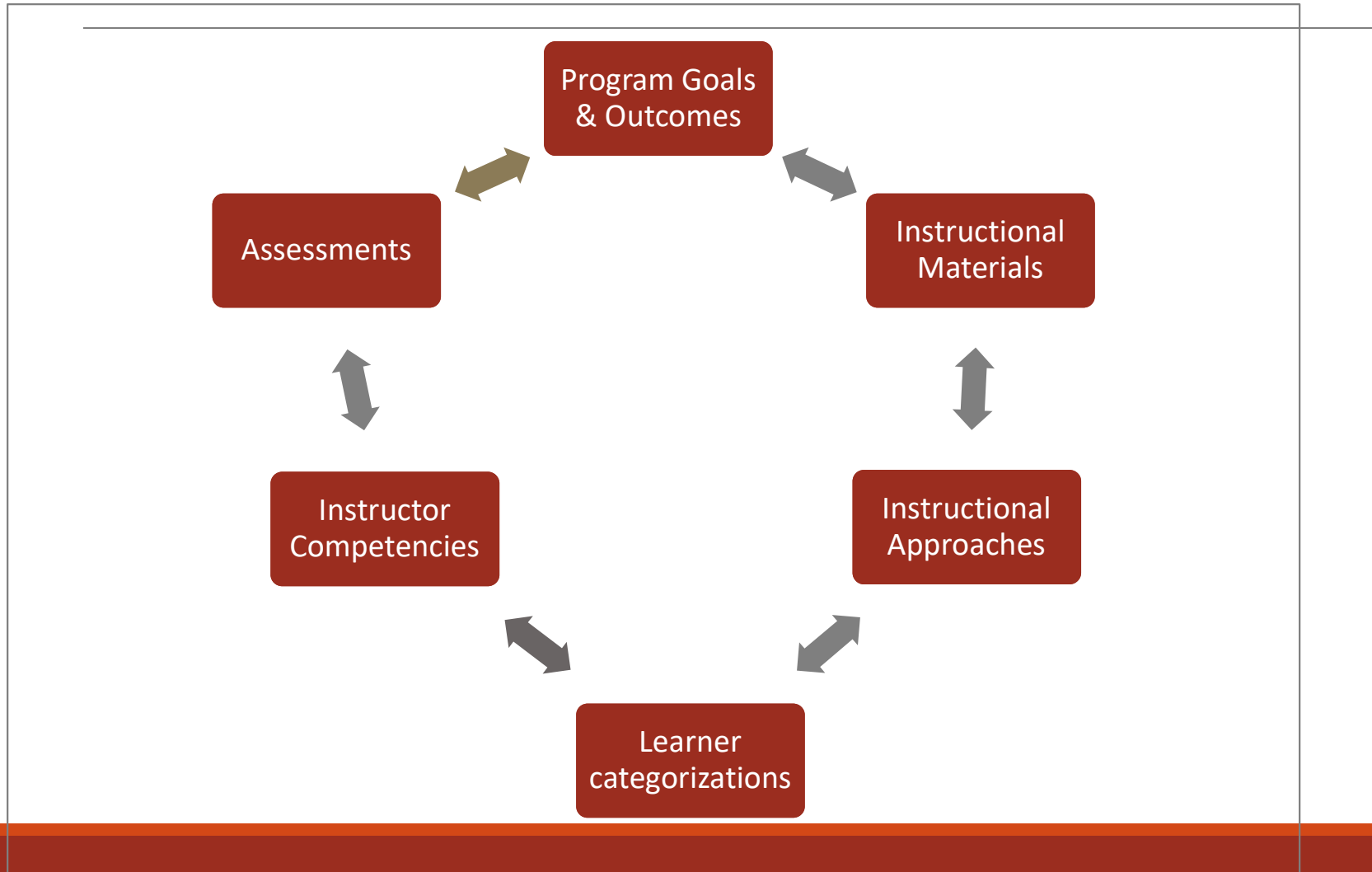
# Curricularizing Language: Concentric Circles

---





# Core Program Elements



# Two main approaches to language teaching (Stern, 1990)

---

## **ANALYTIC**

### **Focus on grammar**

Study of rules and language items

Practice of language items

Attention to accuracy and error correction

Less attention to social interaction

## **EXPERIENTIAL**

### **Focus on substantive themes or functions**

Engagement in purposeful activities

Focus on language use

Priority on meaning transfer & fluency

Social interaction important



# Language instruction requires the categorization of learners

---

*Beginners*

*Intermediate learners*

*Advanced beginners*

*Dual language learners*

*Heritage language learners*

*Long-term-English-learners*

This construction of language- learner categories,

may appear to be neutral and common-sense descriptions of student characteristics (McDermott 1996),

but they deeply affect the academic lives of students who are sorted and categorized in ways that seriously impact their lives (Kibler and Valdés, 2016).

# Choosing instructional materials is fundamental

---

Materials must be aligned with program goals.

In many programs, the language textbook is the curriculum.

But the choice of materials is often complicated.

In the current educational context, vendors sell “evidence- based” solutions for:

---

Addressing vocabulary gaps

Teaching sentence stems

Leveling English Language Development (ELD) classes

Supporting the acquisition of “cash” English

Developing phonological awareness

Building reading fluency

Promoting lexile growth

Closing the achievement gap

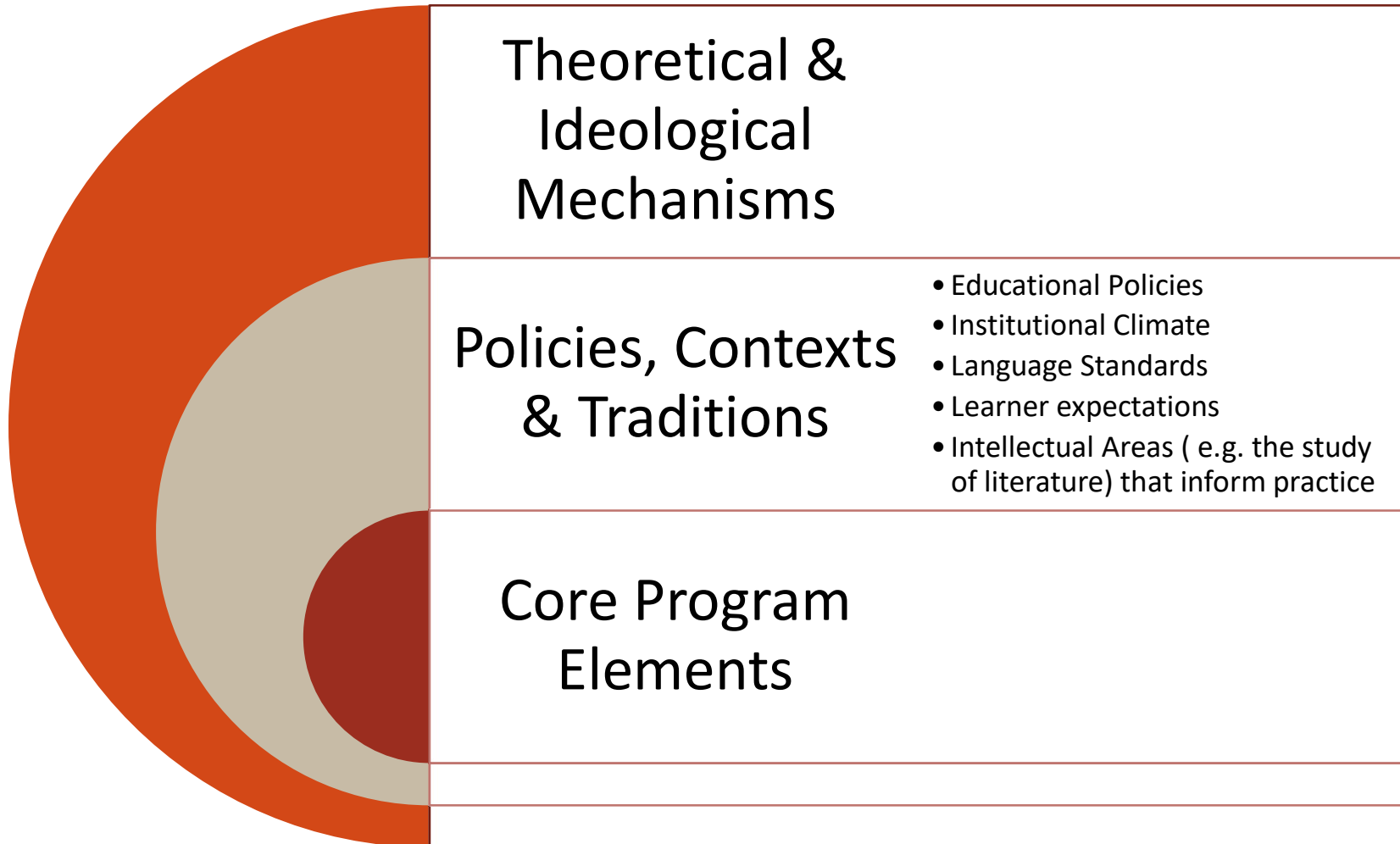


# Classroom Assessments

---

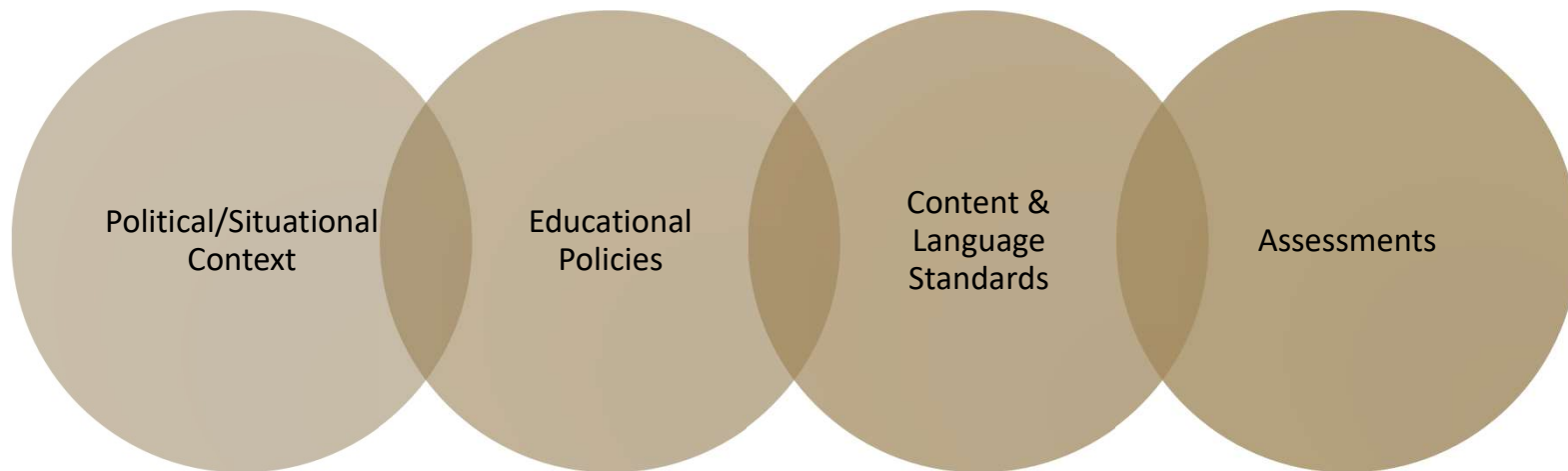
At their best, classroom assessments include:

- formative procedures that provide information for teaching
- assessments of language development for engaging with specific content.



# Policies, Contexts and traditions

---



# Language policies

---

- are enacted at multiple levels (state, school district, institution).
- establish expected competencies and proficiencies
- implement standards of various types (e.g., content standards, ELP Standards).

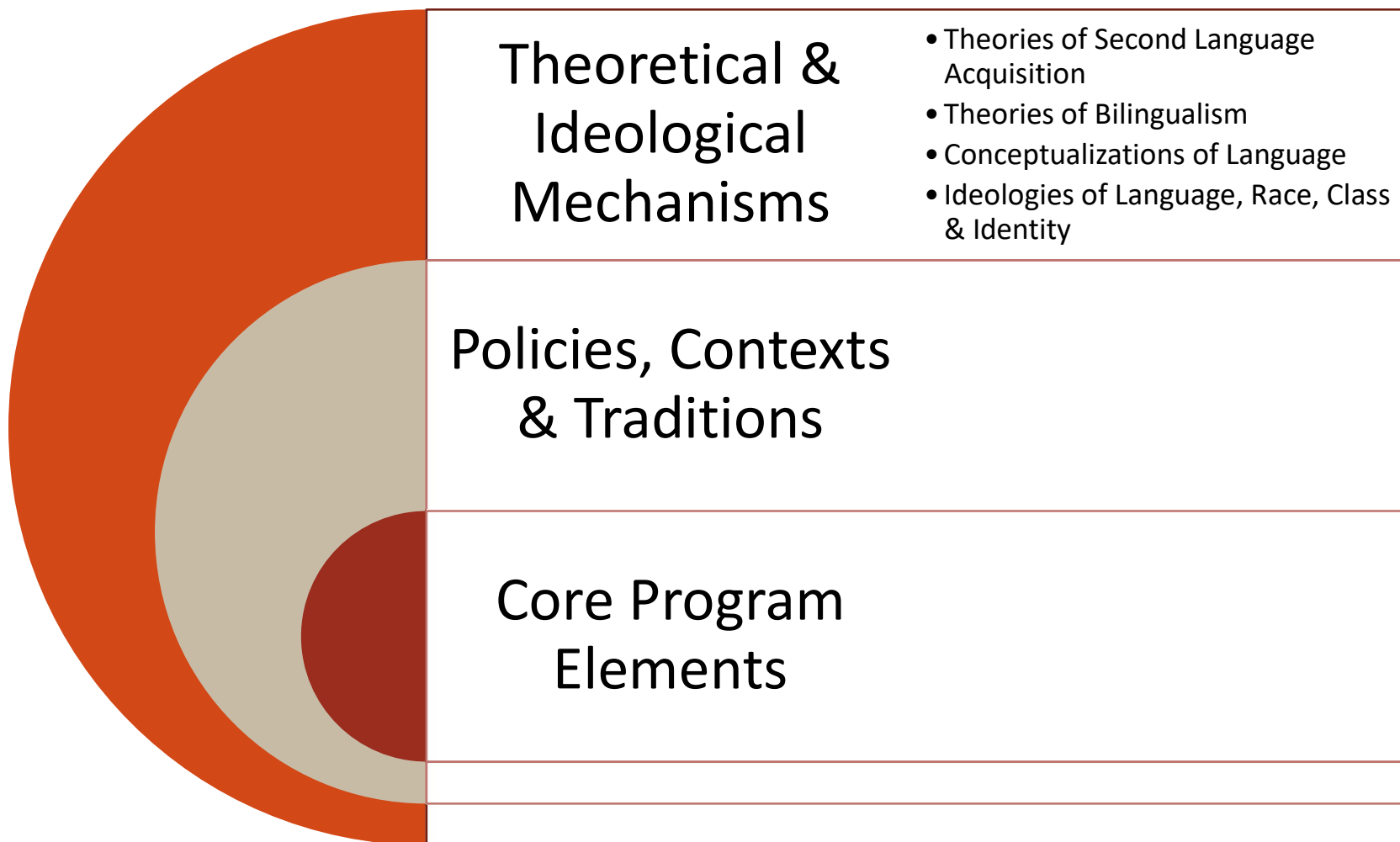
# Policies mandate Accountability Assessments

---

These are designed to measure learning outcomes as mandated by relevant language policies.

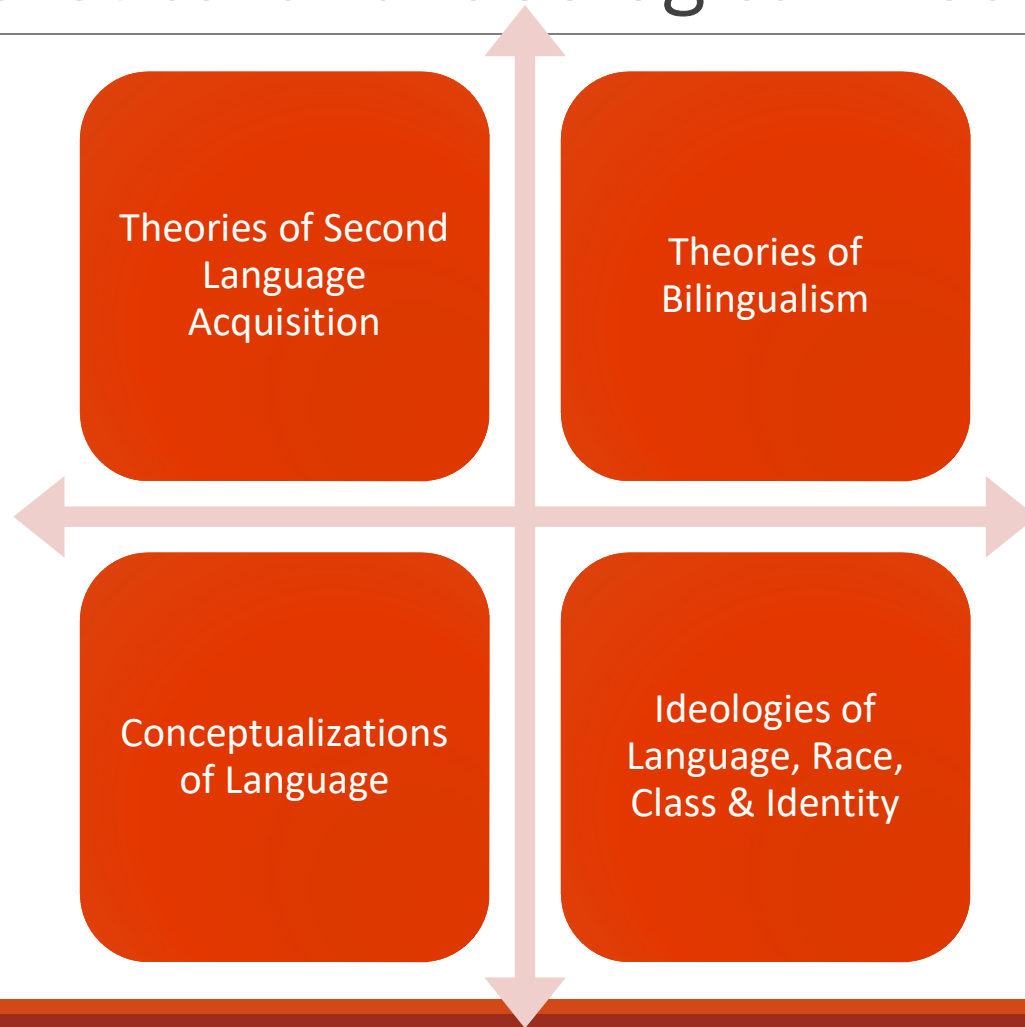
How language is conceptualized in these assessments has an enormous impact on what happens in classrooms.





# Theoretical and Ideological Mechanisms

---



# Conceptualizations of Language matter a great deal (Seedhouse, Walsh & Jenks, 2010)

---

“Teaching” language requires) that we agree on:

- What it is that has to be learned/taught given that definition of language.
- What it is that needs to be taught given different learner characteristics and goals.
- What we know (and don’t know) about how those aspects of language are learned.
- What we know about how **teachable** these aspects of language are in a classroom context?



# So what is language, anyway?

---

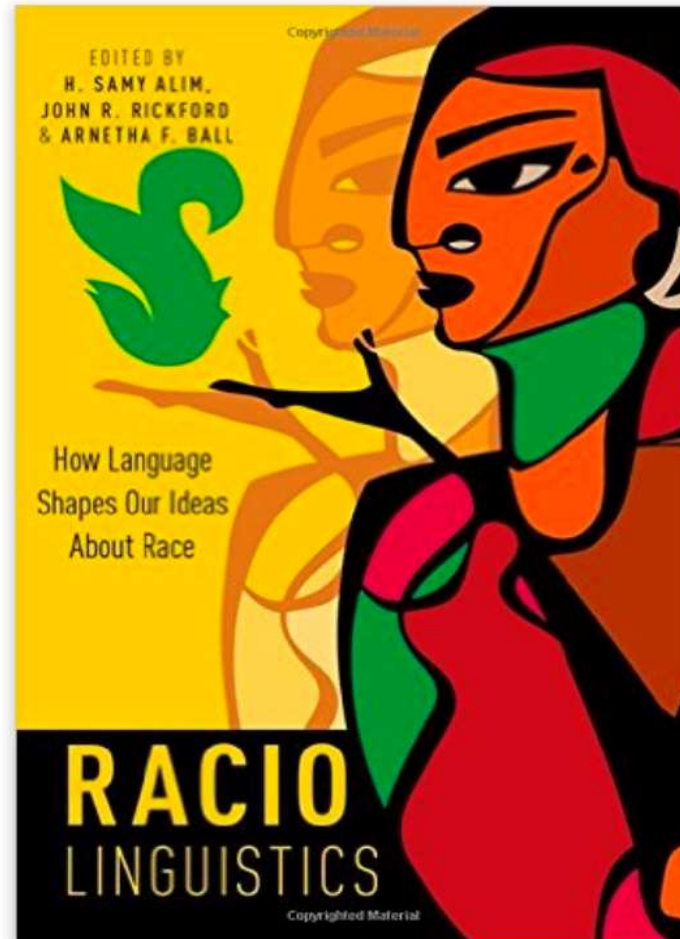
- a) Structure and form?
- b) A semiotic system?
- c) A social practice?
- d) A set of rules?
- e) All of the above?

# Language ideologies also matter

/these are: unexamined ideas and beliefs that shape people's thinking about language and about those who use language.

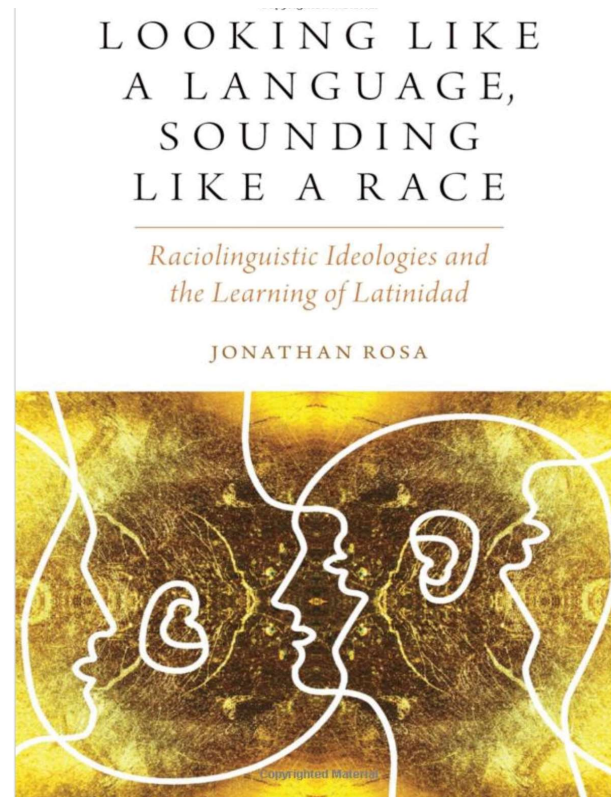
-often multiple and conflicting-

include “notions of what is ‘true,’ ‘morally good,’ or ‘aesthetically pleasing’ about language, including who speaks and does not speak “correctly.”



In their recent work, young scholars are pointing out that we both **see** and **hear** language

---



Because these scholars are engaged in the study of the intersections of language, race, and social class (Flores and Rosa, 2019), they point out that:

---

1. The bilingualism of the children of elites (e.g., Princess Charlotte) is seen differently than that of minoritized students from racialized backgrounds.
2. Low-income, immigrant-origin students from racialized backgrounds are framed exclusively as “English learners” (ELs) who pose a challenge for public schools.

To summarize the first part of this presentation:

---

When we “teach” language, we are involved in process of curricularizing language.

This process involves a series of interacting mechanisms and elements all of which function as part of a complex system depicted in the concentric circles of the figure you saw before.



# So: Why is it important to **Get Language Right** when we teach?

---

Why does understanding the process of language curricularization matter?

It matters:

- for dual language programs that enroll only minoritized students?
- for two-way programs that bring together two groups of very different students.

These are contexts in which we are engaged in “teaching” language.



Just for today:

---

In order to make clear why language is not an ordinary school subject that can be curricularized easily or successfully,

I want you to conceptualize language as a type of complex skilled performance.



This complex skilled performance is perhaps similar to playing a musical instrument.

---





Or developing superior abilities in playing a particular sport.

---



Both of these activities may be initiated in school settings and involve instruction.

---

However, “instruction” is very different from that implemented in the teaching of traditional academic disciplines.



**Mathematics**

**Social Studies**

**English Language  
Arts**

# For example: teaching students to play a musical instrument

---

Involves teaching students skills and sub-skills such as a finite set of initial specifics

- where to place the lip plate of a flute,
- how to hold and balance an instrument,
- how to breathe and tongue to produce clear notes

Learners practice as needed in order to engage in performance.



# Rehearsal & Performance

---

Typically performance involves the playing of a musical piece which is then rehearsed repeatedly until the level of age-appropriate quality is reached.

With very rare exceptions, for example participation in a jazz ensemble in which improvisation in response to the improvisations of other is usual, the playing of a musical instrument is not interactive.



## Teaching language might seem similar

---

Students can also be taught specifics such as vocabulary, sentence frames, dialogues and be asked to rehearse them with others in their class.

But unlike the playing of rehearsed musical piece in performance, language is primarily interactive.

Rehearsing the specifics and producing a memorized dialogue with a partner will not prepare students for the unpredictability of interactivity with actual speakers of the “target” language.



Perhaps developing language skills is much more similar to developing expertise in playing a team sport-

---





If you analyze a  
basket ball  
game

You can see the complexity of  
the game

You can see the basic skills  
underlying play:

- Dribbling
- Passing
- Shooting
- Rebounding

But if you are a  
coach of young  
and new  
players:

You can't be  
discouraged by  
the complexity.

Two things are  
essential:





You need to  
develop your  
players' skills

And you need to give them the opportunity to play the game

---



Playing the game is essential to the development of lasting expertise.

Dribbling by yourself will only get you so far in basketball.

Similarly, using memorized expressions will only get you so far in classroom discussions.

Young players and young learners need BOTH fundamental skills AND the opportunity to PLAY THE GAME.

An example of playing the game:

---

The NSF-funded **Stanford Integrated Science and Language (SiSL) Project**:

<https://sisleducation.stanford.edu>

## Project goals:

---

Shifting the discourse on the teaching of science from a focus on:

the *demands* made by the NGSS standards (e.g. Lee, Quinn & Valdés, 2013)

to an exploration of *opportunities* and *affordances* that are made possible by three-dimensional science learning.



## Stanford **Integrated** Science and Language (SiSL) was engaged in:

---

Developing and field-testing fifth-grade instructional materials and aligned with NGSS

Designing instructional procedures that support the development of English

Expanding the field's understanding of what it means to **“integrate”** language and science

One key goal is to shift teachers' attention from:

---

1. The language **of science** (e.g., terminology, language as used in science textbooks)
2. The language **for science** (i.e., the language used to engage in the science practices in an ordinary classroom)

# Who

---

We are concerned with students  
*bureaucratically categorized as ELLs*



SiSL classrooms are organized as **Communities of Practice** that are both phenomenon and practices centered.

---



## In such classrooms,

---

Students engage in learning together and solving problems in a shared domain.

Learning takes place in active participation and observation.

Most importantly, because learning is to a great degree social, it builds on the knowledge of others (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2009).



## Lee, Quinn & Valdés( 2013) argued that:

---

Both teachers' and students' language use in science classrooms vary in important ways depending on whether they are engaged in:

- Whole-classroom participation (one-to-many)
- Small group participation (one-to- small group)
- Interaction with individual peers (one-to-one)

## More recent work (Valdés & Capitelli, 2016 and Alvarez, Capitelli & Valdes, 2021)

---

Has sought to contribute further to the field's understanding of the role of talk and text in science classrooms

by making a distinction between *ordinary/every-day talk* and *specialized talk* and

by describing the oral- to literate continuum and its role in science communities of practice.

Research on one-to-one  
talk from a conversational  
analytic (CA) perspective  
has shown that:



In  
face-to-face  
(one-to-one)  
interaction

Talk builds on the talk of others

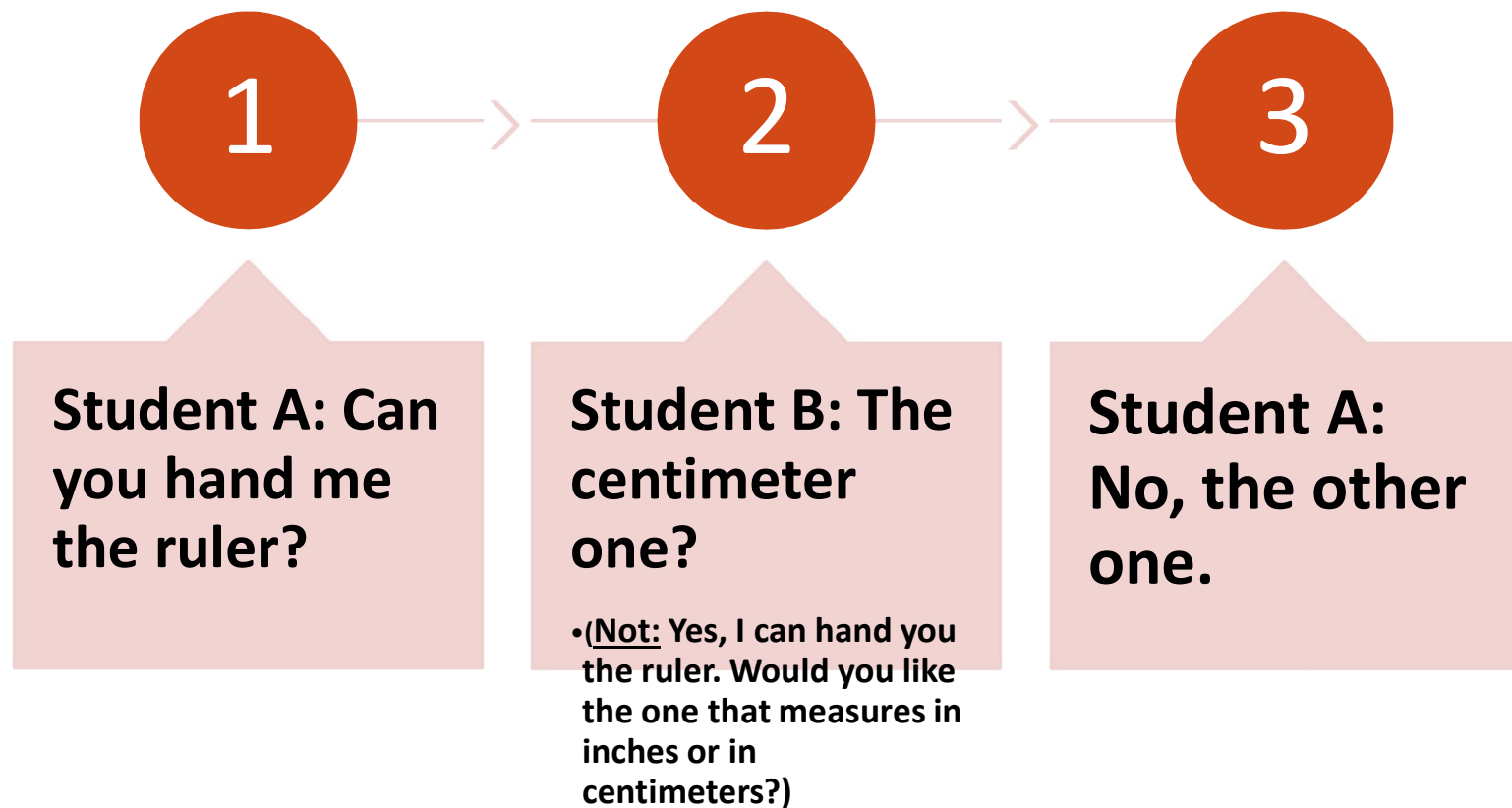
Speakers have access to indications of agreement and disagreement

Others can easily interrupt and ask for clarification

Talk can be elliptical and telegraphic

# Talk is Elliptical- building on the language of others

---



# Six Guiding Principles

---

- 1. Language is a complex, dynamic system.** Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2002, 2006, 2012, 2017), Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008), de Bot, Lowie & Vespoor (2007), Vespoor, 2017).
- 2. Language acquisition is not linear. Variability in learning trajectories is pervasive.** (Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2002, 2006, 2017), Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008), de Bot, Lowie & Vespoor (2007).
- 3. Language develops as a result of meaningful participation in human interaction.** (Duff, 2007, 2010; Duff & Talmy, 2011; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984, 1995, 2008; Ochs 1988, 2000).



4. Language structure emerges from the repetition of many local events (J.L. Bybee, 2006).
5. Direct language teaching may not significantly alter learners' developmental trajectories. (Larsen-Freeman, 2017; Vespoor, 2017).
6. Extensive guided access to **affordances** can contribute significantly to the development of language resources in an additional language (Van Lier, (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008).

---


## Language in Use

---

We view the science-learning classroom as providing a number of **valuable opportunities** (*affordances*) for language use and for the development of both oral and written language.

---

These opportunities can be identified and built upon to help students learn how to best use the language resources that surround them.




# Affordances in Language Development

---

The notion of *affordances* in second language acquisition in language builds on the original work of **Gibson (1979)** in ecological psychology.

In applied linguistics, the concept of ‘affordance’ was used by **Van Lier (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008)** pointing out that learners are agents who engage with their surroundings in a number of ways, and language learning happens in the context of purposeful action.



In most classrooms, affordances are present in the recurring activities such as the following:

---

1. Whole-class/small-group instruction
2. Collaborations between groups of students
3. Viewing videos and other multimedia presentations
4. Reading for a purpose to find information from a variety of sources
5. Writing for self and for others

In sum: practicing bits and pieces of language--  
like focusing only on separate skills in the gym -  
-won't really work.

---

1. Spending time in the gym only dribbling basket balls with other learners or
2. Playing exclusively with other unskilled team members will not result in marked improvement.

## To conclude:

---

In the case of activities that involve complex skilled performance, the only legitimate measure of success is the performance itself.

If students of trumpet cannot play in the band;

if our junior varsity baseball players whom we have coached cannot pitch and hit and run and catch, we have failed them in fundamental ways;

It does not matter that they may have scored high on measures of wrist movement or body position at bat.


# In our classrooms, in order to ensure equity:

---

We have to create the conditions that that can develop students' ability to **use** language in order to learn.

To succeed in school, ELL-categorized students must **actually** play the game.

This means that we need to problematized the ways in which we are currently **curricularizing** language in our classrooms.



---

**Thank You**

**[gvaldes@stanford.edu](mailto:gvaldes@stanford.edu)**