Linking learning and assessment:

a can-do framework

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Linking learning and assessment

- Two starting points:
- 1. Assessment bodies are getting more involved in learning. A particular aspect of this is the interest in *formative assessment* (but we shall have to examine what we mean by this).
- 2. Thanks to the CEFR (but not only), learning and assessment objectives are being increasingly defined in functional, can-do terms.

Relevance for Cambridge ESOL

- Our traditional customers valued:
- English
  - It is popular and perceived to be important
- The “Learning ladder” of exams at all levels
  - Learners as individuals, not cohorts
  - Attainable targets, test when ready
- Proficiency framework
  - “Real world” skills, criterion reference
  - Comparability across languages, learners
- Positive impact on learning
  - Positive classroom washback
  - Framework for lifelong learning

Relevance for Cambridge ESOL

- But times are beginning to change:
- Increased engagement with state education
- In the UK, engagement with languages other than English (Asset Languages)
- Here our relationship with stakeholders (learners, teachers, decision makers) may be less comfortable.

Linking learning and assessment: the issues

- We need models which clearly relate *inputs* to learning with targeted *outcomes* of learning.
- We need to address the frequently problematic place of assessment in learning, i.e.:
- The institutional misuse of assessment (i.e. for accountability)
- Teachers' conflicting roles with respect to assessment
- Poor professional development of teachers with respect to assessment.

So why a can-do approach?

- We should focus on language learning as a process of acquiring skills:
- not simply can-do *outcomes*, describing students' ability in some "real world",
- but above all the learning skills, the enabling skills and strategies which are the basis of effective learning in the world of the classroom.
- This is partly about pedagogy and methodology.
- But it is also about building a conceptual framework in which language learning and language use can be seen as different aspects of a single, continual process.

But what exactly is *formative assessment?*

- Two very different meanings:
- 1) Just like summative assessment but timed differently, so information can feed into further teaching
- Typically based on a detailed list of attainment targets.
- Test each student against each target.
- Assessment as progress chasing

Two meanings of *formative assessment*

- 2) Very different, even antithetical to summative assessment.
- = *Assessment for Learning* as promoted by the Assessment Reform Group in the UK
- A reaction against standardised testing and testing for accountability;
- Assessment as a continuing dialogue between teacher and students, improving learning, flexibly integrated into day-to-day classroom practice.

Assessment for learning

- Crucial features
  - 1.The provision of effective feedback
  - 2.The active involvement of pupils in their own learning
  - 3. Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment
  - 4. A recognition of the influence of assessment on motivation and self-esteem
  - 5.The need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and to understand how to improve.
- i.e. aimed at developing learning skills

Teachers as assessors

- In the UK: Renewed Government willingness to re-instate teachers as assessors
- But in practice, teacher assessment is conceived in summative terms (i.e. in relation to achievement of targets, reliability, objectivity…) (Teasdale & Leung 2000, Leung & Rea-Dickins 2007)
- Contrasts with "..complete lack of support normally given to teachers in devising and applying procedures to pinpoint students' learning problems, .." (Black 1998)

CEFR: a comprehensive treatment of teaching, learning and assessment

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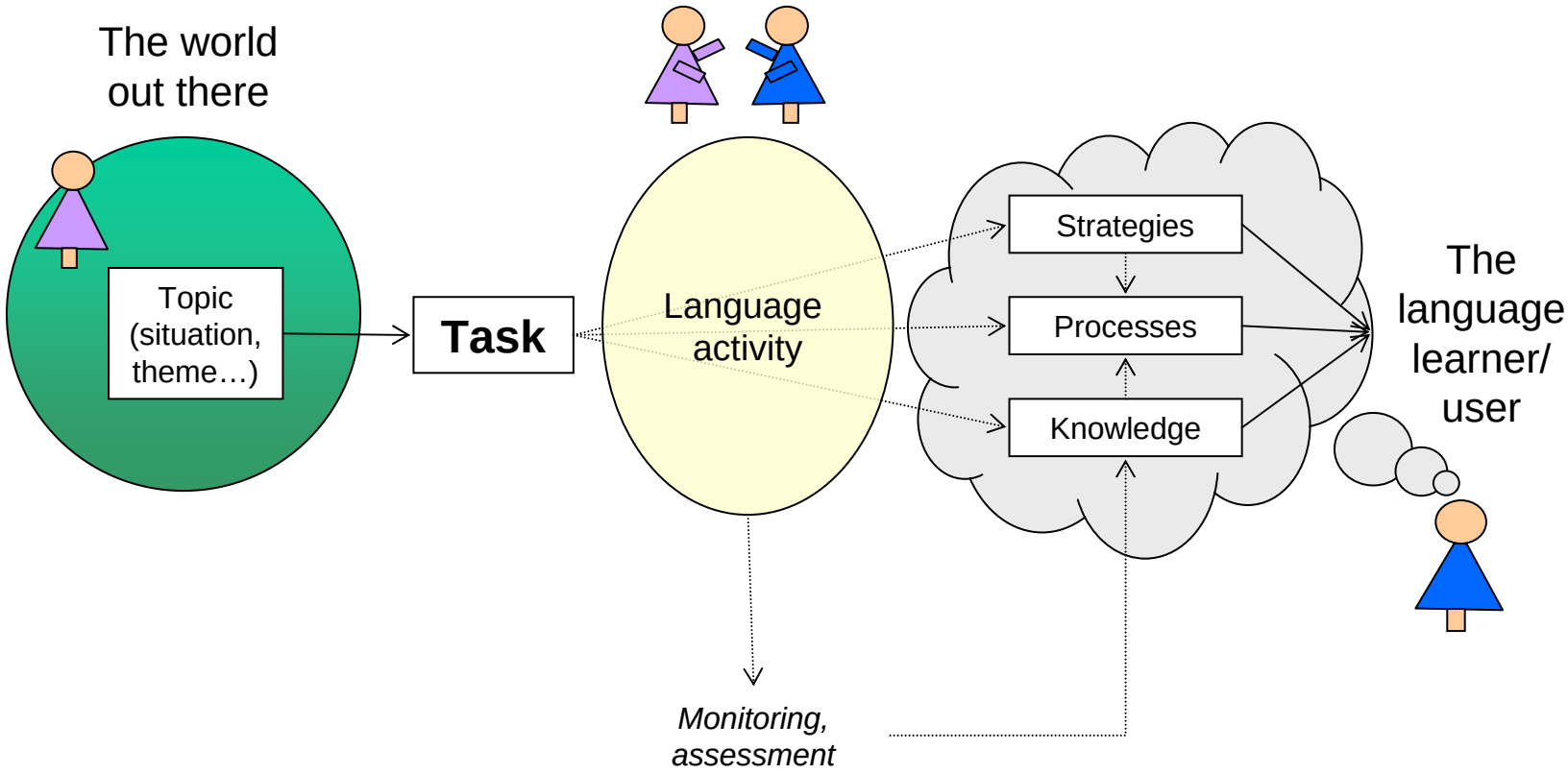
- The CEFR's model of language use:
- "… the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of ***competences***, both ***general*** and in particular ***communicative language competences***. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various ***conditions*** and ***constraints*** to engage in ***language activities*** involving ***language processes*** to produce and/or receive **texts** in relation to ***themes*** in specific ***domains***, activating those ***strategies*** which seem most appropriate for carrying out the ***tasks*** to be accomplished…." (CEFR: 9, emphasis in original).

The CEFR's model of language use



Criticisms of the CEFR

- The CEFR has been criticized for:
- lacking a theory of language development (a cognitive dimension);
- Representing an outdated model of learning
- Being too imprecise in its formulation e.g. to support assessment;
- trying to impose a monolithic, standardised approach to language study;

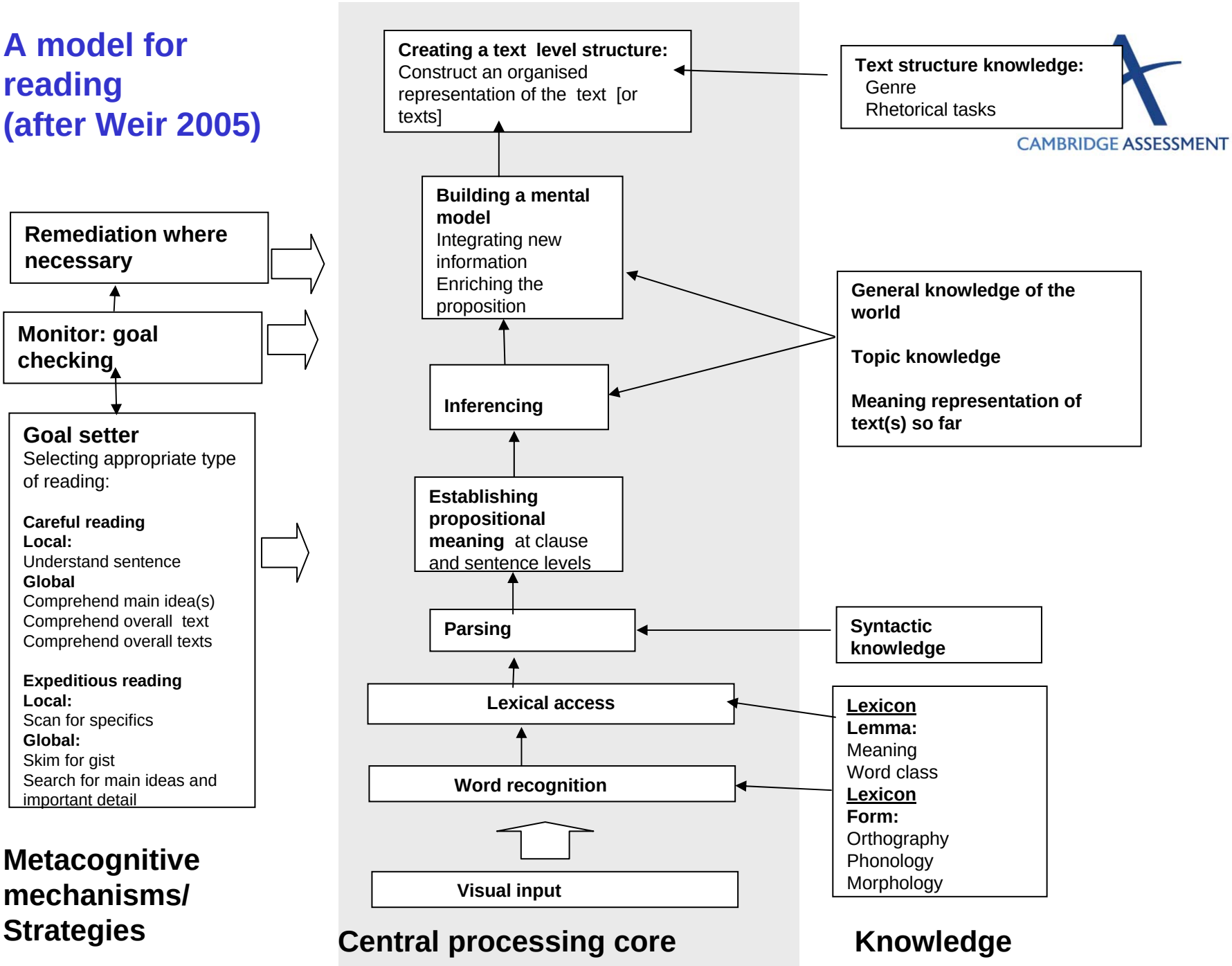
Is the CEFR too focussed on *outcomes* of learning?

- The CEFR has been blamed for stressing the *outcomes* of learning (the *social* dimension) over the *inputs* to, or the *process* of, learning itself (the *cognitive* dimension).
- But this is partly because many readers focus on the reference level descriptors – the can-do scales -
- rather than on the ‘comprehensive, transparent and coherent framework for language learning and teaching’ which the CEFR aims to provide.

Linking the social and cognitive dimensions

- A *socio-cognitive framework* offers a useful conceptualisation of language learning, use and assessment (Weir 2005).
- Preferable to a simple *needs analysis* paradigm

A model for reading (after Weir 2005)



A socio-cognitive model of language learning in a formal setting

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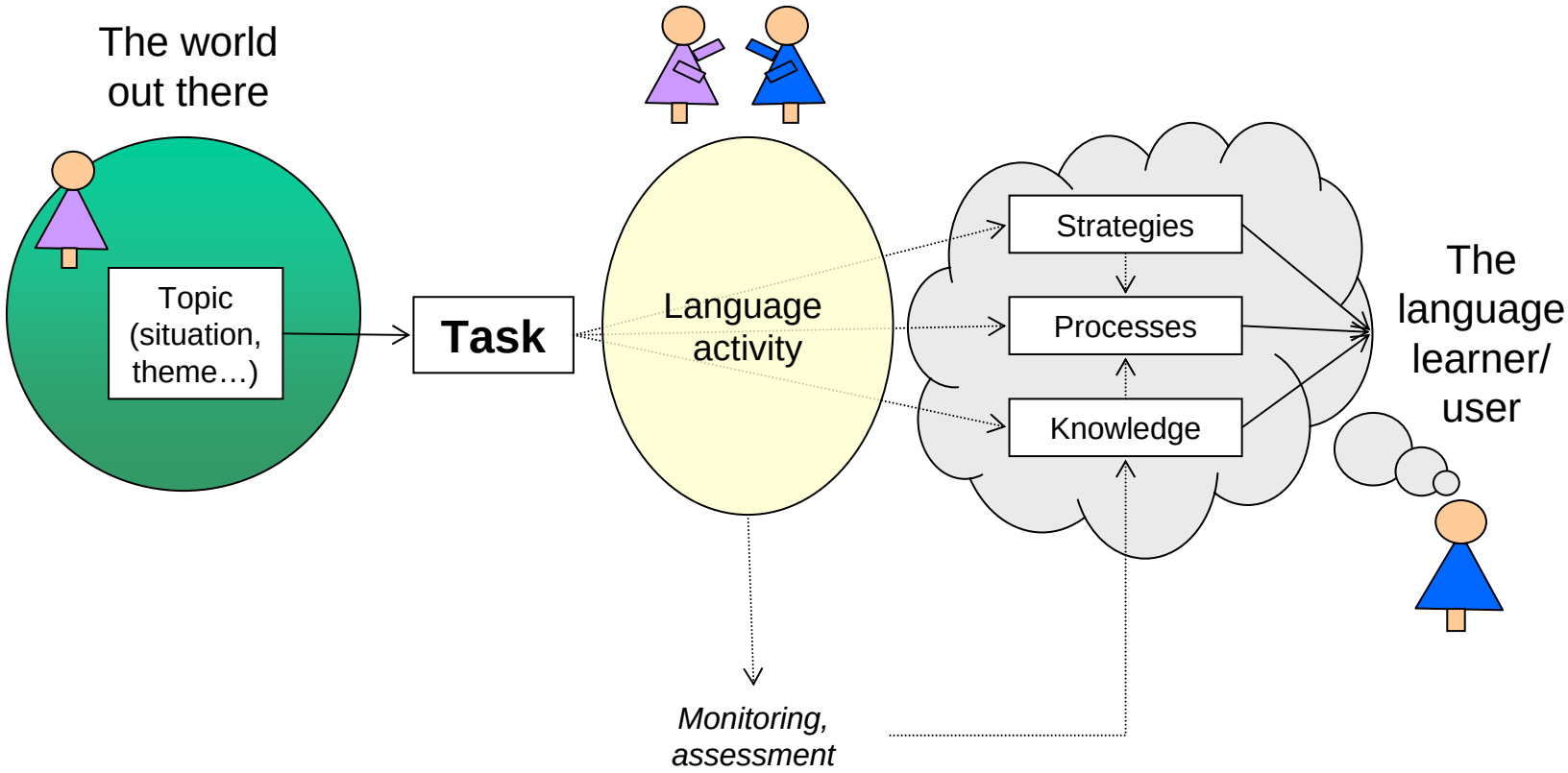

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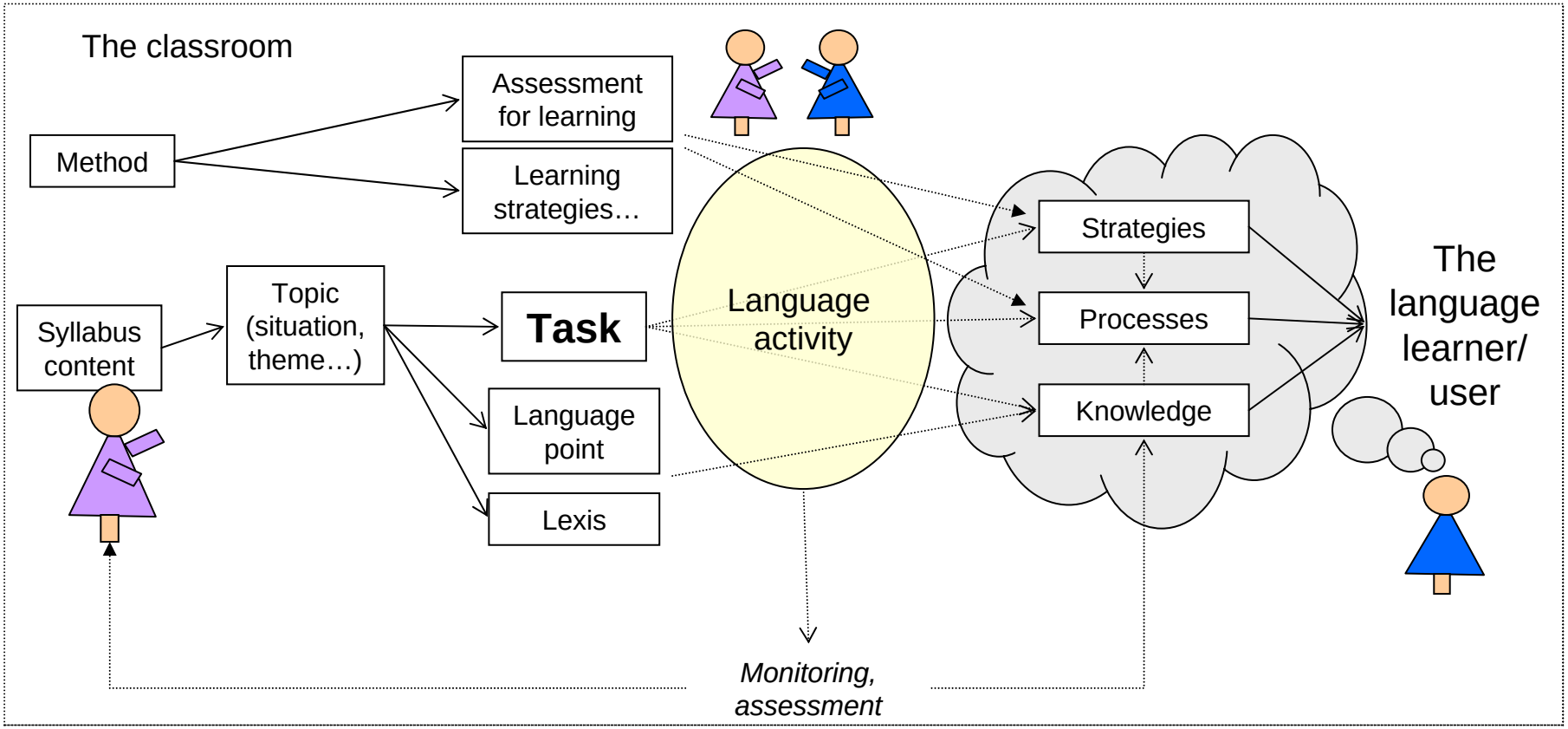
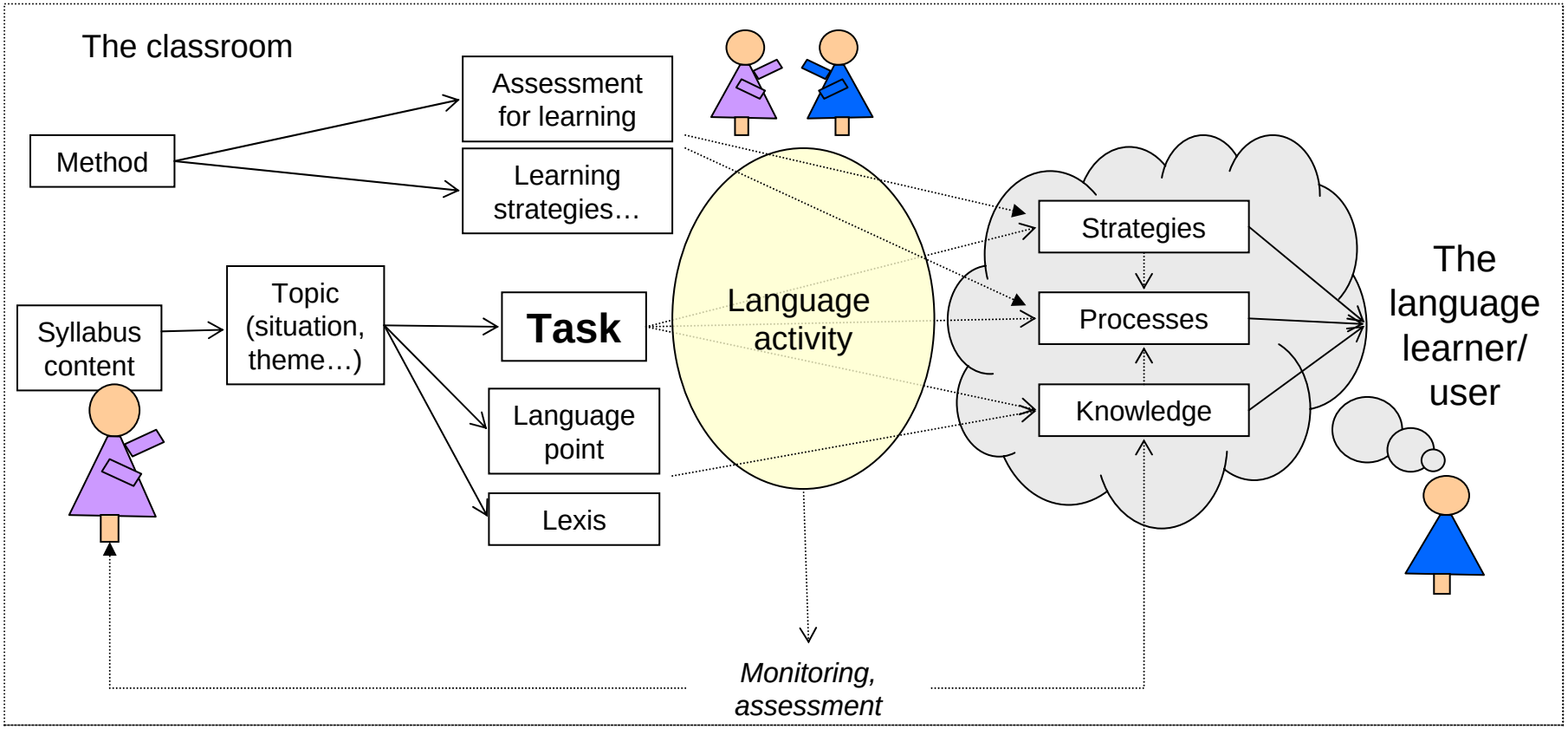


Formative and summative focus



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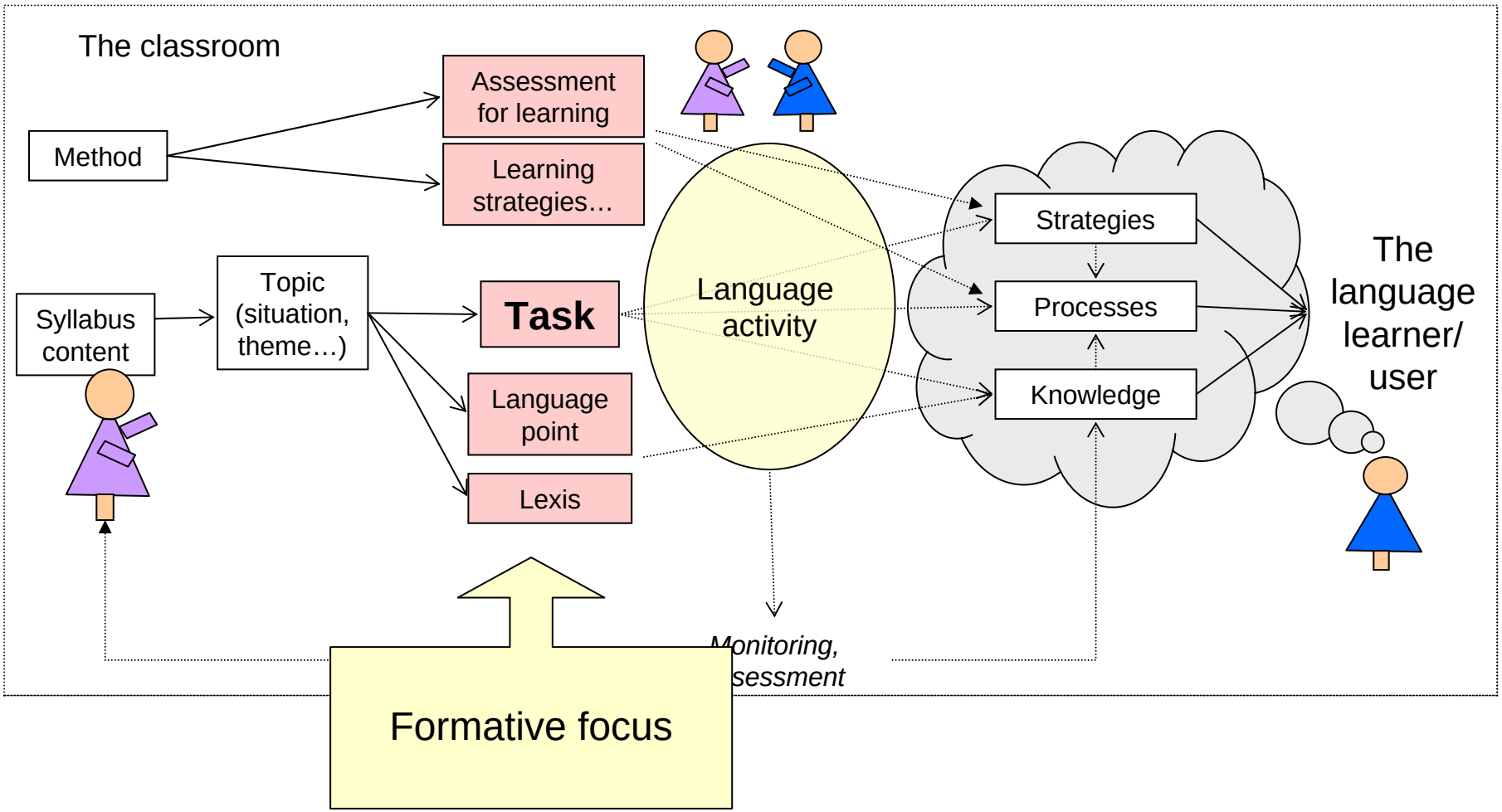

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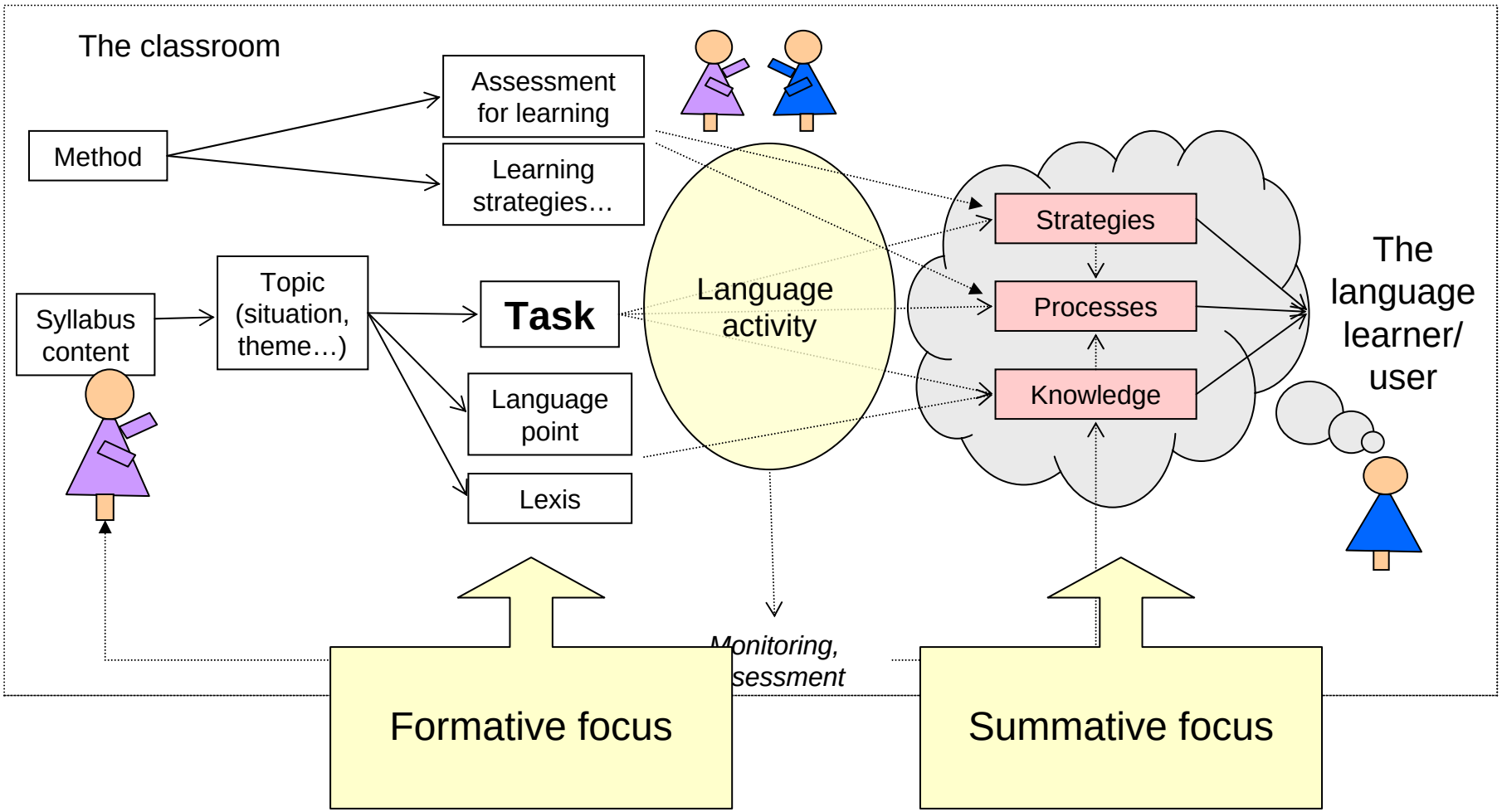

Can-do’s for the classroom

- Relating to:
- Curricular objectives, course content
- Learning how to learn, *assessment for learning* objectives
- Instructional content areas
- Language awareness, knowledge about language
- Cultural issues, inter-cultural awareness

Descriptors relating to instructional content areas

- i.e. school subjects studied through the medium of the language (CLIL, EMILE)
- C.f. WIDA consortium's *English Language Proficiency Standards for English Language Learners in Kindergarten through Grade 12*

WIDA consortium example:

English Language Proficiency Standard 3: *English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of* ***Mathematics****.* (Grade cluster 1-2)

Example Topics	Level 1 Entering	Level 2 Beginning	Level 3 Developing
Graphs Interpretation of data	Shade or color graphs according to oral commands modeled by a teacher (e.g., "Here is a graph. Color this bar red.")	Identify data in graphs from oral commands modeled by a teacher (e.g., "Which bar shows the most?")	Locate information on graphs based on oral statements (e.g., "Which bar shows that most people like ice cream.")
Number sense	Provide comparative data on graphs from oral descriptions (e.g., "Fill in the graph. Most children are wearing red, some are wearing blue, and the fewest are wearing green.")	Provide identifying information that involves real-world numbers (e.g., age, address, or telephone number) to a peer	Give examples of things with realworld numbers (e.g., room numbers, bus numbers, or calendars) to a peer

Language awareness

- Explicit reflection on language (native and foreign) should form part of the school curriculum.
- Some language awareness topics: (Peter Downes)
  - Languages change – why?
  - Languages borrow from each other – why?
  - All languages have patterns, structure, “grammar”
  - Language is linked to the history of a country, and matters to people.
  - Language is linked to the geography of the world – how languages travel

Knowledge about language

- In the UK: an element of the Keystage 2 (Primary) Framework for languages
- Links mother-tongue and L2 language instruction
- Builds on understanding of basic grammar categories now taught as part of Literacy Strategy

Learning how to learn

- In the UK: A project of the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme.
- It builds on the principles of Assessment for Learning:
  - The active involvement of pupils in their own learning
  - The need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and to understand how to improve.

Language learning strategies

In the UK: an element of the Keystage 2 (Primary) Framework for languages:

- Planning: Analysing and evaluating ways of learning
- Communicating: Understanding and being understood
- Practising language
- Applying prior knowledge
- Improve memorising ability
- Using monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Discuss language learning: example activities

- Learn about the different languages spoken by children in the school
- Talk about the different languages they know or have heard around them through family members, friends, the media, in the neighbourhood or when visiting other countries.
- Talk about dialects and accents within the UK – different people may pronounce the same word differently or use different words.
- Children and teacher compile a list of languages spoken by children within the school. Locate the country/countries where these languages are spoken using maps, atlases and globes.
- Use interactive whiteboards to create a ‘live and growing’ resource of different languages eg. sound files of greetings in different languages.
- Etc

Different kinds of can do descriptor used in ELPs (Lenz & Schneider 2004)

- 1. Scaled CEFR descriptors;
- 2. Adaptations of CEFR scaled descriptors for particular learner groups, e.g. young learners;
- 3. Context-specific achievement-oriented descriptors, e.g. related to syllabus content;
- 4. Descriptors which do not relate directly to a language proficiency scale but rather to independent categories such as learning strategies or descriptions of cultural or intercultural experiences.

- i.e. the content to be learned, the skills to deal with learning, and the targeted outcomes in terms of capacity for language use.

Lenz and Schneider on ELP descriptors

- On context-specific, achievement-, syllabus-oriented descriptors:
- “Being so closely related to actual classroom practice, these descriptors may be tremendously useful in improving learners’ self-assessment skills and, if linked to an ELP in some way, enhance the perceived usefulness of that ELP. It is not surprising that descriptors of this type were produced in large numbers for use within or in combination with ELPs for children…”

In conclusion 1

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- Is this really an issue for language testers?
- Yes, if they wish to do formative and summative assessment within the same frame of reference. Possible approach:
- Adopt a suitable model of learning/assessment
  - socio-cognitive framework
  - Support, scaffolding as an intrinsic aspect of classroom and test performance
- Develop capacity to incorporate curricular objectives
  - Current basis in Waystage, Threshold, Vantage levels;
  - Work on Reference Level Descriptions, e.g. Profile Deutsch, English Profile Project
  - Vital to distinguish *content to be taught* from *likely levels of performance*
- Find an appropriate way to support teachers
  - promote communities of practice, i.e. language testers as facilitator
  - enable teachers to understand and work with the framework, e.g. via exemplars of tasks and performance

In conclusion 2

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- The CEFR has relatively narrow scope reflecting:
  - Language school origins of many descriptors
  - Utilitarian emphasis (where is *Bildung*?)
- Be prepared to develop more educationally-oriented interpretations of the CEFR
  - CLIL
  - Cognitive / metacognitive strategies, learning how to learn
  - Language and cultural awareness
- What is meant by *scaleable*?
- How much progression in language learning is natural, how much conventional?
- Is there a place for other conventional definitions of progression?


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