

Supporting frames or collapsing hierarchies

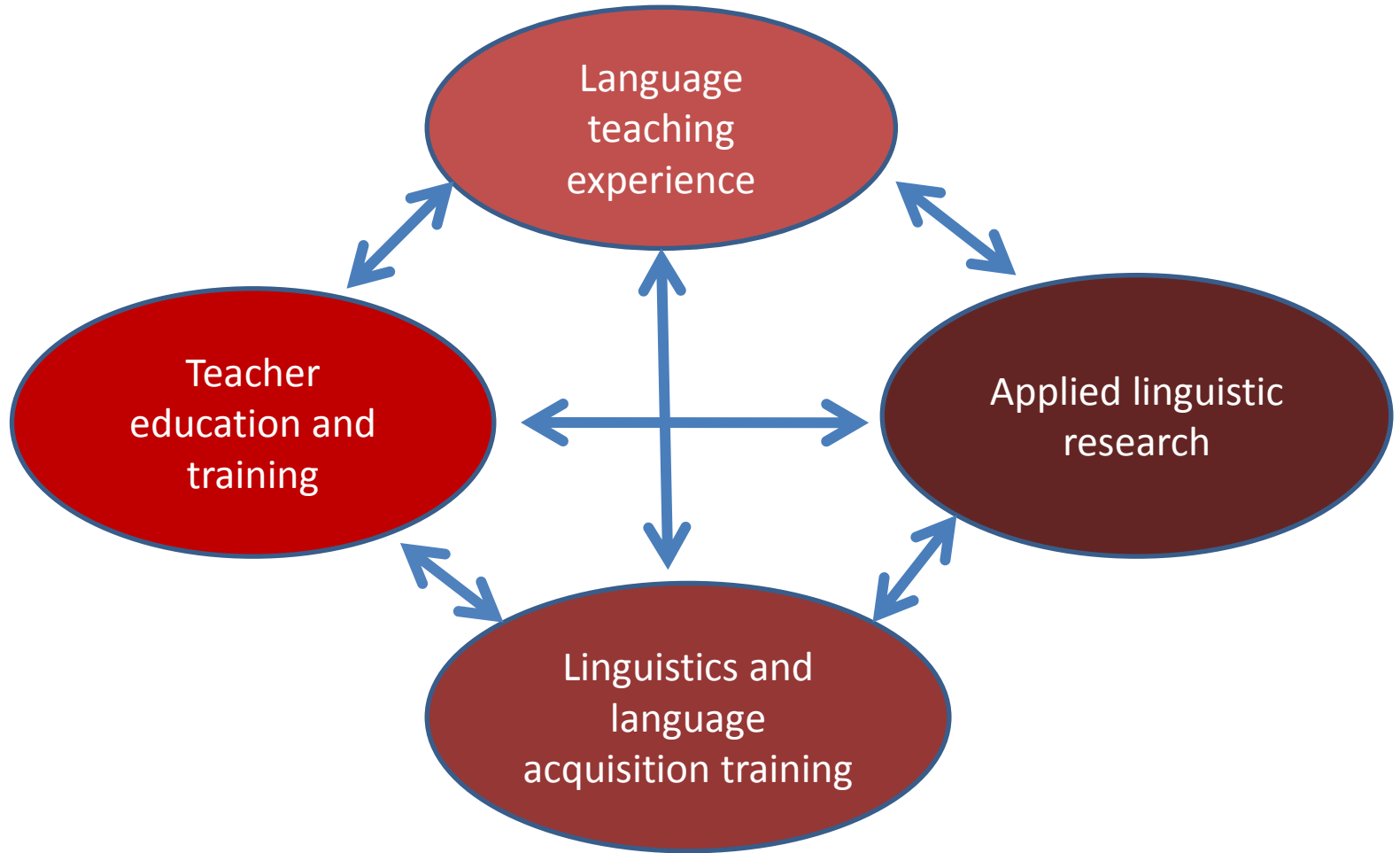
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Ivory towers and real world problems

- Linguistics: the study of language and language phenomena
- Applied Linguistics: the study of real world problems in which language plays a central part (Brumfit 2000)
- Real world problems for educational applied linguistics:
To investigate and respond to problems of learners and teachers and other stakeholders

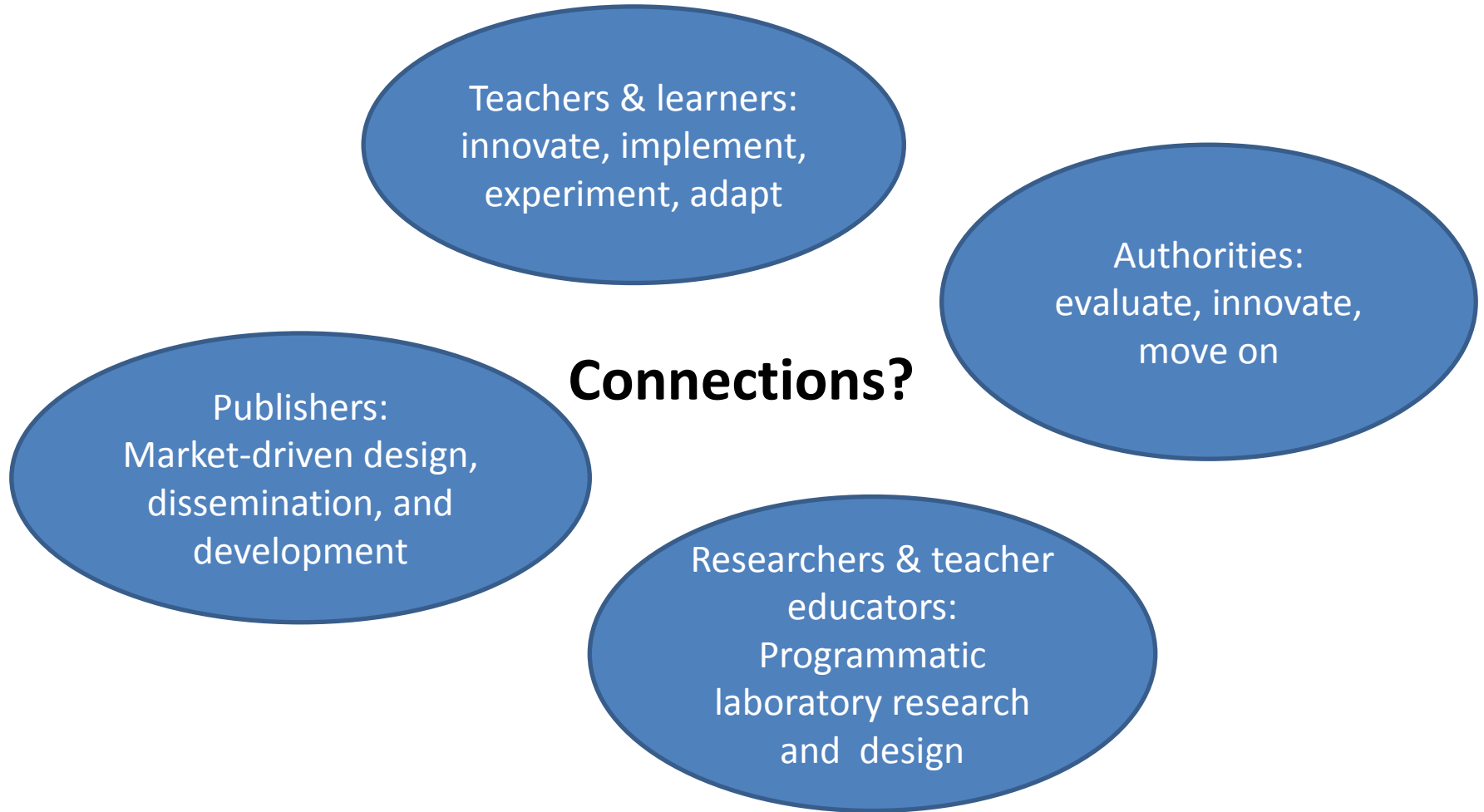
Working with influences



TBLT as an example – a particular interest & problem

- Communication Task - the 'hub' for lessons, units, schemes of work
- Task as activity with unpredictable language and meanings:
 - learners have a task goal, materials, and use language as they wish to achieve goal
- Supporting activities:
 - circulating around the hub: before - during pauses in the task - or after
 - written or spoken
 - talk about language - exercises – drills – translation – peer or teacher feedback
- The problem: can research help to innovate, disseminate, implement, and develop?

TBLT as part of a real world problem



My themes today – possible supporting frames for developing applied linguistics

- Cognitive Linguistics
- Socio-cultural theory
- Corpus Linguistics
- Skills theory
- Dynamic Systems Theory
- TBLT and a crisis in development of real world research?

Theme 1: Cognitive linguistics

- Knowledge of language seen as built out of our pragmatic knowledge of the world - contrasts with the abstract 'deep' processes central to chomskyan linguistics: e.g.
- Language learning seen as using the same cognitive processes as other kinds of learning:
 - a) Driven by physical and socio-cognitive needs;
 - b) Using pragmatic inferencing to uncover meanings, and relationships between words:
 - 'mummy' 'doggie' 'juice' 'bath' 'over there' 'please'
 - 'a doggie' 'your bath' 'some juice' 'what's that?'

Cognitive linguistics: a simple example

A child...

- works out what a spoon is in her environment;
- learns to identify the parts of a spoon;
- similarly works out the ‘word’ corresponding to the object;
- then works out the relationship between the word ‘spoon’, and the ‘parts’ that go with the word:
 - ‘a spoon’ - ‘spoons’ - ‘**your** spoon’
- then relationships with words like: ‘hold’ ‘don’t drop’

Commentary

The child identifies words from stream of speech;
works out match between word and world;
and works out relationships between words, and other ‘parts’.

Implication

Language can be learnt from the surface of discourse, and from its context, given needs and interests normal cognitive equipment.

Cognitive linguistics – so what?

- Language can be learnt from the surface of discourse, and from its context, given needs, interests and normal cognitive equipment.
- Linguistics then focuses on what it means to know things like article use, use of prepositions, plurals, tense, aspect, pronouns, conjunctions and so on.
- And on how we are able to infer these things from context.
- A linguistics of the surface – what might be called ‘a common sense’ linguistics, or a linguistics of ‘real language’.
- Connects directly to what language students are trying to do.

Applying a principle of cognitive linguistics in language teaching

- Students can have difficulty using pronouns, and distinguishing 'he' and she':
- So consider Hillary and Bill: do you agree, yes or no, to the following statements:
 - He's sincere
 - She's loyal
 - She's a chancer
 - She's honest
 - He's got charm
 - She's got guts (after Bill VanPatten 1996)

Theme 2: socio-cultural theory (SCT)

- Language and learning as fundamentally **social** phenomena – mental processes are the internalisation of social events:
 - Driven by the urge to achieve understanding of others, and to be understood by others.
- Affects the learning of: pronunciation, grammatical patterning, vocabulary are all made available for learning through social acts (talk, writing, whether in home, in public, in lessons, or course books)
- Impact - learning seen as mediated by others:
 - driven by a focus on meanings
 - supported by processes of segmentation and negotiation of language
 - resulting in *co-construction* of resources and understanding
- Assumption: the perceptible surface of language can be directly internalised (as in Cog Ling)
- Some problems within the theory – the notorious Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – referring to actions that the learner can make with support – the difficulty of determining what is in the zone and what is not

SCT – so what?

- Places the teacher and classroom centre-stage in learning
- The surface of language is where learning takes place (WYSIWYG)
- Teacher-class talk a crucial medium
- Mutual attention and involvement also central
- Connects up to some of the central principles of communicative and humanistic approaches to language education

Theme 3: Corpus linguistics

Focus on associations between features in terms of:
syntagmatic (string) relations
Paradigmatic (substitution) relations

Reveals patterns which are otherwise invisible:

'the cause of the trouble' (Stubbs)

For positive events?

'cause of satisfaction'? *'cause of irritation'?* *'cause of pleasure'?* *'cause of development'?*.....

Associations physically accessible via concordances – a visual display of occurrences and co-occurrences of a feature and its contexts

Used to study how words pattern:
in texts (Hoey)
within registers (Michigan corpus), or how patterns change across time (Culpeper)

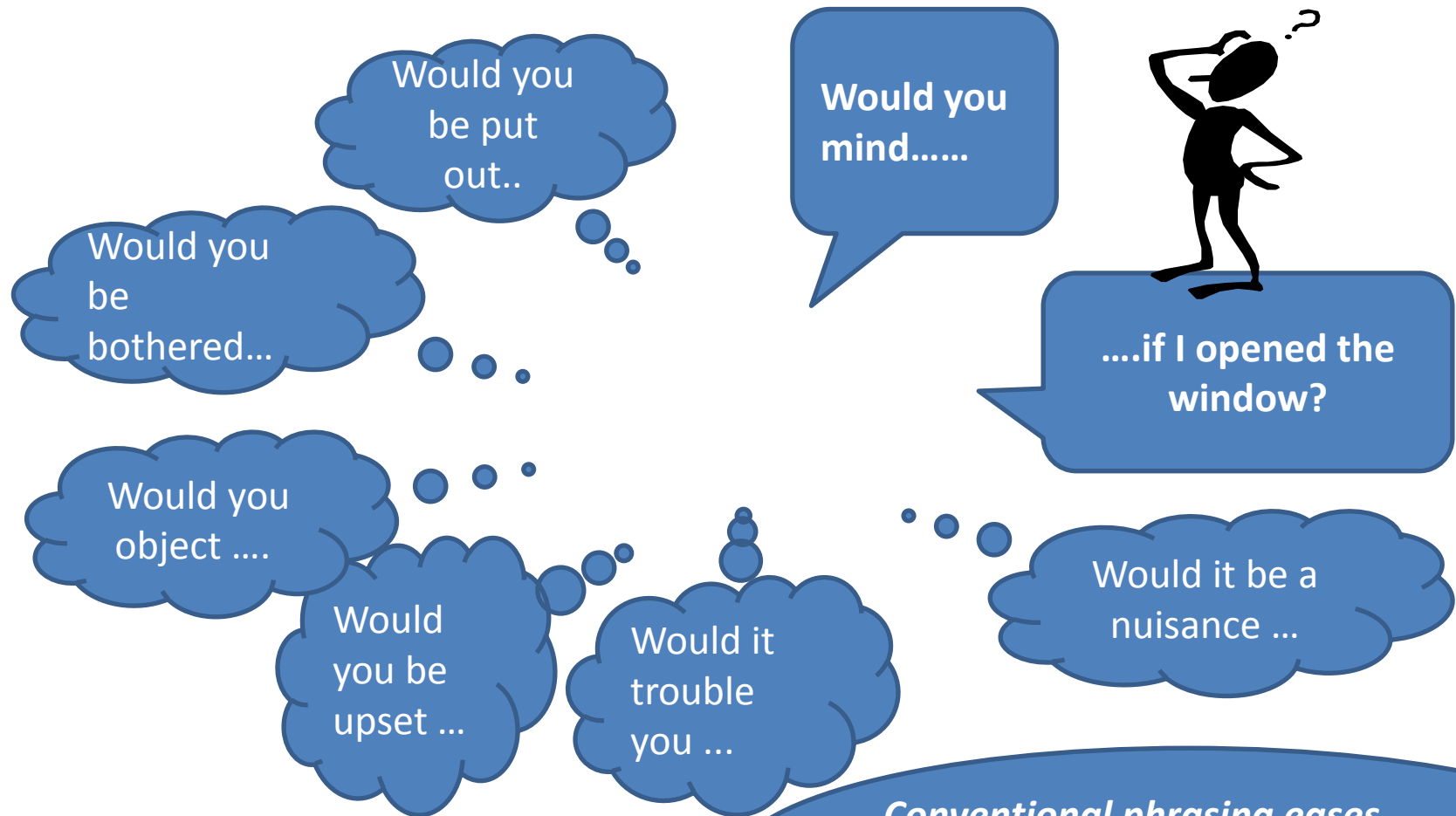
The key point here: all this information derives from the surface of language

Corpus Linguistics – so what?

Used...

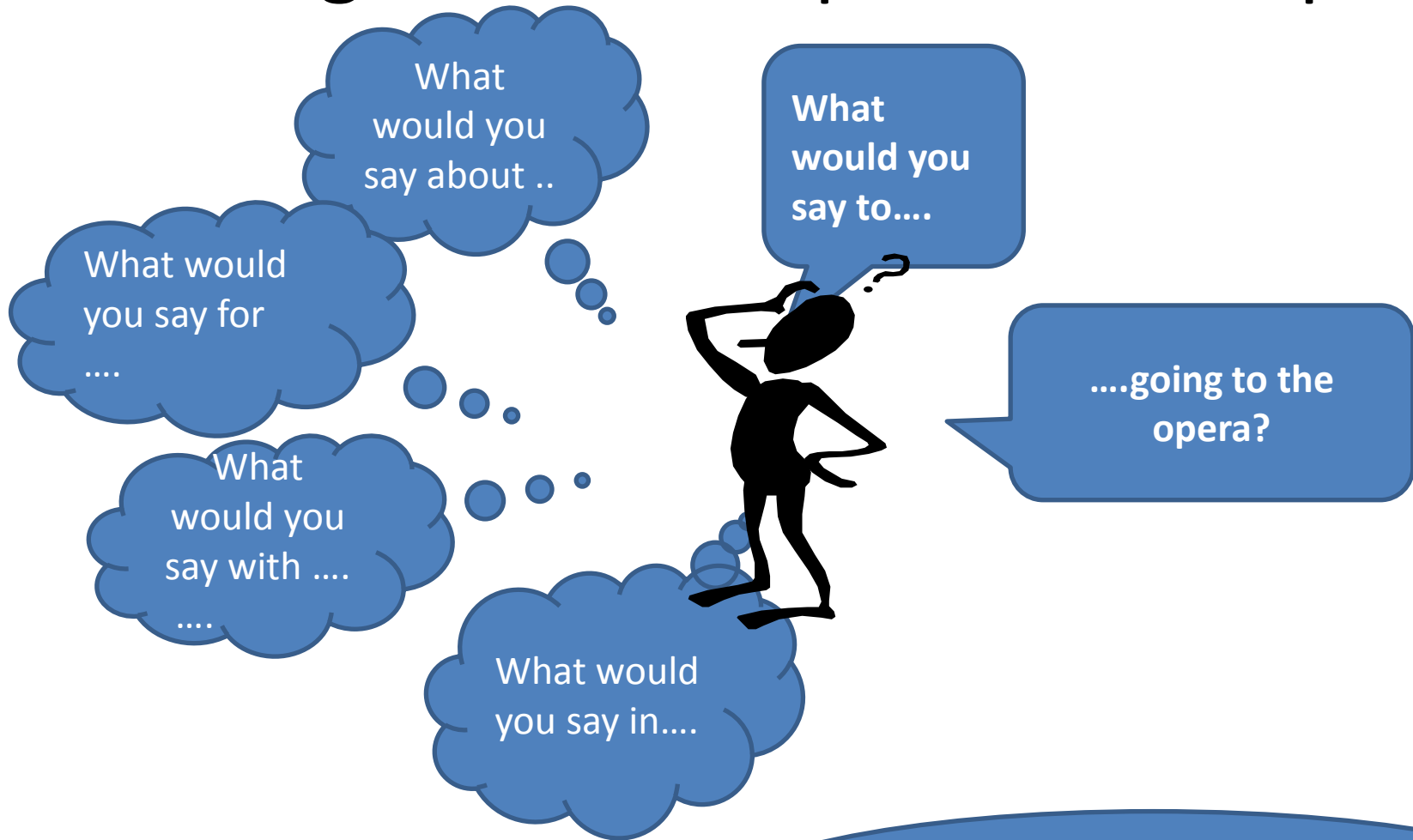
- To identify normal patterning, such as grammatical patterning of vocabulary, and idiomaticity
- To identify and explain deviant uses of language (e.g. in forensic linguistics);
- To understand ageing or dementia (Wray);
- To help understand first language development (N.Ellis)
- And second language development (Mitchell)
- As a teaching and learning tool:
if collocations help communication, then they must also help learners and learning.

Having standard expressions helps...



Conventional phrasing eases processing and eases understanding (Wray 2000)

Having standard expressions helps...



Conventional phrasing eases processing and eases understanding (Wray 2000)

Collocation in language teaching: the 'marker' sentence

'The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen' (Guy Cook, 2001)

Marker sentence

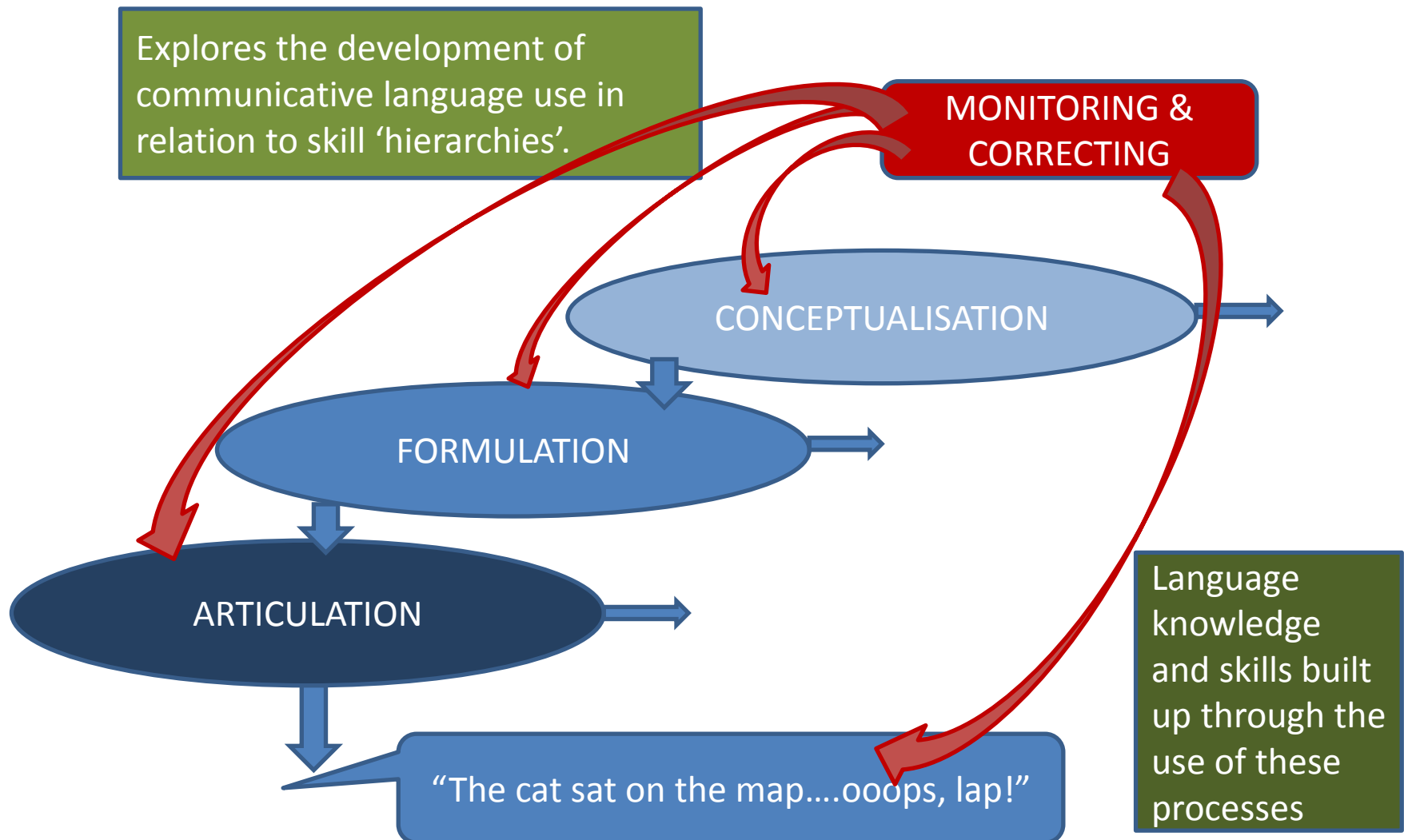
- Marker or model sentences are sentences that are clear examples of the target language of the lesson. Marker sentences help learners understand the structure, use and meaning of new language. They can also provide information about context, including collocations and connotation and work as a reliable example for learners to record.
- Example
The aim of the class is for learners to understand the use of the present perfect to describe something that starts in the past and continues. The marker sentence the teacher writes on the board is 'I have lived here in Japan since 1989'.
- (Quoted from the British Council/BBC 'Teaching English' website)

Corpus & Cognitive Linguistics

Both assume that patterns of use map directly onto a person's or community's knowledge of language.

Both assume that the surface of language provides a key gateway to learning.

Theme 4: Skills theory (Willem Levelt 1989)



Skills theory – so what?

- Points out the different types of subskills involved in many aspect of language use;
- Highlights the importance of integrating the different levels;
- Shows how skills are pragmatically driven;
- Raises the idea of ‘part’ vs ‘whole’ skill practice
- Helps illuminate some of the problems in providing helpful feedback (especially the distinction between ‘*on-line*’ and ‘*off-line*’ feedback)

Summary so far

- Collocational phrases give direct entry in the pragmatics and psycholinguistics of communication
- They open the door to the learning of lexico-grammatical structure
- They reflect the socially constructed nature of language, and of learning
- They reflect the 'surface' based approach to language description and language learning of cognitive linguistics
- Language is not just 'knowing about' but also 'knowing how'
- All four areas of work show how language works in the real world, and how we are all able to find our own way...

Theme 5: Dynamic systems theory

The nature of systems:

- 1) *interrelated parts working together as a whole*
- 2) *in movement* – seeking equilibrium ('attractor states') but goes through bumpy phases
- 3) *adjacent or larger systems* affect internal dynamics

Language learning as a development of systems:

E.g. development of the grammar system

System-internal factors:

grammar itself made up of different sub-systems – syntactic systems; and word class systems: e.g. verb systems; function word systems – pronouns; prepositions; frequency adverbs; determiner system.

- Interacts with: vocabulary system; pronunciation; discourse

DST & Emergence

Emergence

Because systems seek equilibrium, and are influenced by adjacent or by related (larger or smaller) systems:

Trajectories emerge from a complex environment, pushed by the need to achieve pragmatic goals;

Trajectories that are initially random can lead to recurring patterned behaviours - 'attractor states';

Learners' attractor states may converge with the community's current 'norms'; or may not ('error' or 'interlanguage deviance')

What's new here?

a) trajectories are seen as emerging from real world pressures, and from system-internal pressures;

b) all trajectories are potentially unstable;

c) trajectories are always to some extent unpredictable;

d) attractor states may be a help as well as a hindrance.

DST & systems - helpful?

- Helps understand why learning is not a simple linear process – e.g. the learning of aspects of grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation differ qualitatively, and compete for attention;
- Helps understand the complexity of classrooms;
- DST gives meaning to the idea of competition & synergy between systems

Example: the learner's past – the system of the classroom – the system of the school – the system outside the school – and a learner's learning

- Helps understand the notion of absolute unpredictability, and of characteristic pathways emerging.

TBLT in terms of these trends

- Used to focus learners on useful areas of language use, and clusters of language associated with those area;
- Provides a meaningful context as an ‘anchor’: for relevant language, and for supporting activities
- Can be used to provide a thematic link through a programme or course

Links to trends:

In terms of SCT:

enables co-construction of language knowledge through focused language use;

In terms of cognitive linguistics:

enables learners to make direct connections between forms to meanings;

In terms of corpus linguistics:

engages learners in lexico-grammatical – collocational - discourse patterns;

In terms of skills theory: language is a multilevel skills, involving multilevel action, as well as a multilevel system.

In terms of DST:

enables learners to develop trajectories through the tasks, language patterns emerging in response to goals.

Theme 6: Towards a dynamic relationship between research and the real world

Within TBLT a major fault line – from the fact that tasks involve a degree of unpredictability of language: how to think about the relationship between language, learner, teacher and task.

Camp A: 'task as play-thing' - freedom is all – learners are creative beyond the call of the teacher (Duff, Skehan (?), Allwright, Seedhouse, Slimani-Rolls) ; **research focuses on process, not predictive**

Camp B: 'task as disembodied device' - design and implementation are all – no particular role for the teacher, students seen as homogeneous (Mackey, Gass, McDonough, Long, Robinson, Skehan (?): **laboratory-type research, predictive not descriptive**

Camp C: 'task as exploitable tool' - including their systematic use by teachers and students – the task as a system within the larger system of the classroom & within lessons – teacher and learner as central, goal oriented agents (Lynch; Samuda; Philp; Van den Branden) **classroom-based research, process-oriented and predictive**

Camp C seems closest to the classroom problems

Some directions for research

Some specific TBLT areas for investigation

How are tasks used and perceived by teachers and students, and with what kinds of effects?

How do they work within short schemes of work, and through longer programmes, and across series of short courses?

How can their design and use be developed?

Some more general themes

In what ways can different teachers contribute in different ways to the teaching of a course, or the development of programme?

How far is a 'task-based' approach the way of the future, a part of the future, or no part of the future at all?

....because after all, research ultimately has to be concerned with changing its hypotheses and beliefs in the light of the evidence

Towards a bigger supporting frame: some bigger issues for applied linguistics and language teaching

- How to ensure that problems addressed by research are genuine 'real world' problems?
- What to do to relate outcomes of research to real world applications, and investigate the impact of those outcomes?
- What structures can be provided to ensure that research addresses genuine real world problems, to ensure that real world priorities are not sacrificed to academic priorities, and that academic priorities are defined in terms of real world agendas?

Conclusion: the need for a dynamic relationship

- Plenty of interest in language teaching research (see the remarkable continuing success of *ELT Journal*, and IATEFL)
- Yet the current conditions of higher education (RAE-type research assessment, consolidating the power of self-referencing research communities) risk driving a gap between research and the real world.
- A possible response: to develop meaningful structured relationships between applied linguists and the communities without which they cannot hope to be truly applied.

Thank you for listening.

I would be glad to answer questions or comments.

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