

# The Psychology of Assessment

Alex Thorp, Trinity College London



# Outline

- Introduction activities - YOU
- Contemporary Assessment
- Psychological landscape
- Positive Psychology Models – PERMA / HERO
  - Hope
  - Self-Efficacy
  - Resilience
  - Optimism
- Positive Psychology and assessment
- Q&A

# Your experience

Think of a teacher that at any stage of your life,  
and for whatever reason, was good for you.

Why was this teacher good?  
What qualities did they exhibit?



# A people-based profession

- Were the qualities you identified related to the methodology, pedagogy or content?

Teaching and learning a second language is a total human experience, not just an oral-aural or cognitive one (Stevick 76)

Different methods do and don't work for different teachers

Stevick 1976 – Memory, **Meaning** and Method

# 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. As teachers can we facilitate a 'psychological' environment conducive to meaningful experiences that could facilitate learning.*

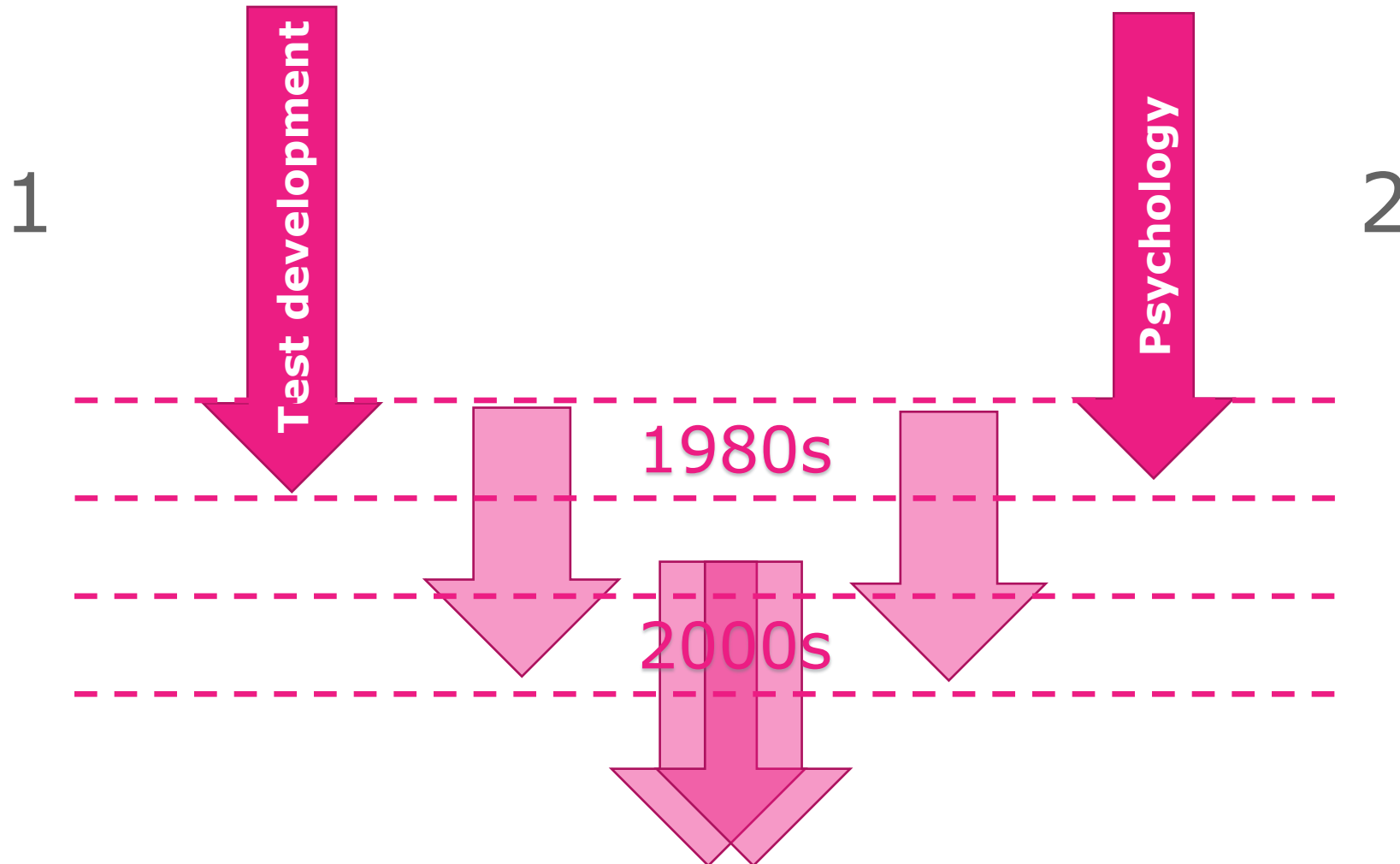
# How are you?

What did you bring with you today.....?



Any classroom or assessment task is a 'psychological experience' – the learner brings their entire psychological self

# Test development and Psychology landscape



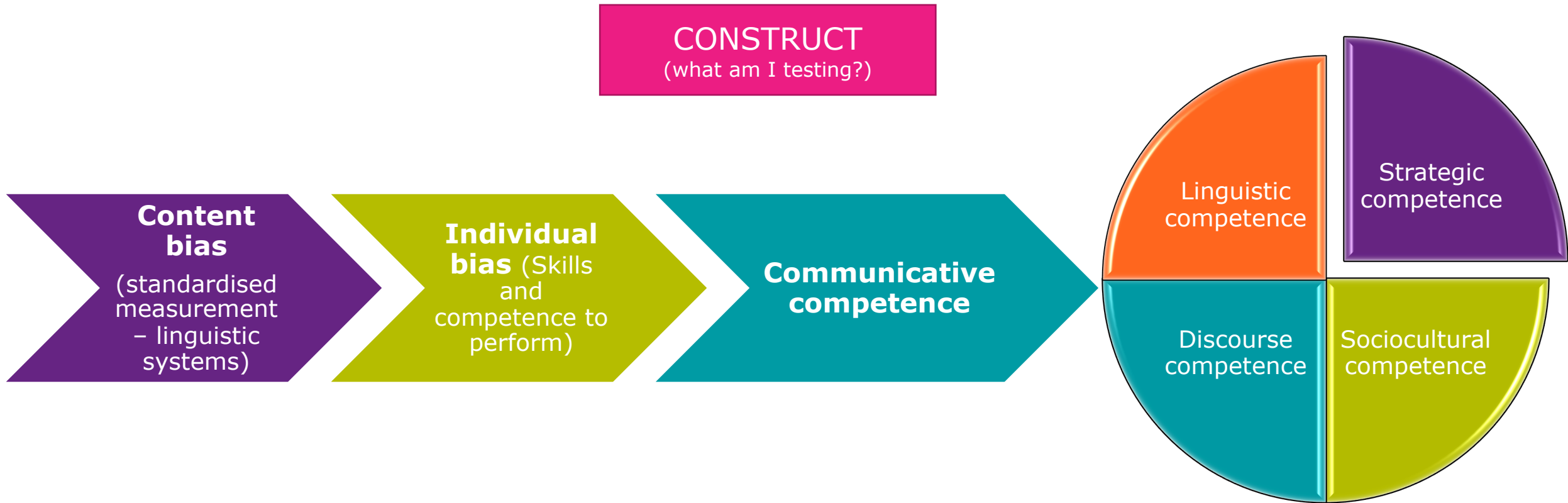
A priming of the individual and individual agency



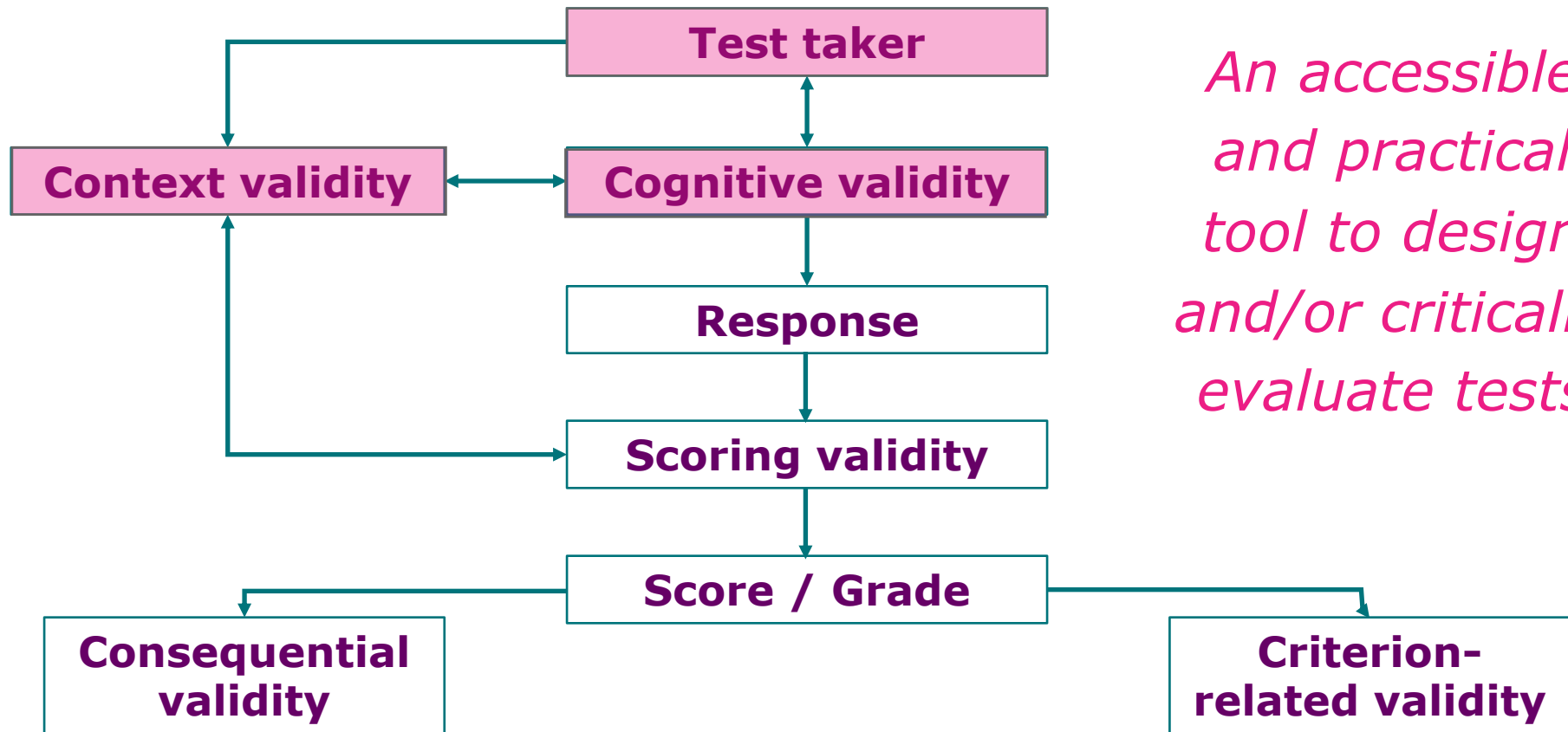
# Contemporary assessment



# Developments in testing theory



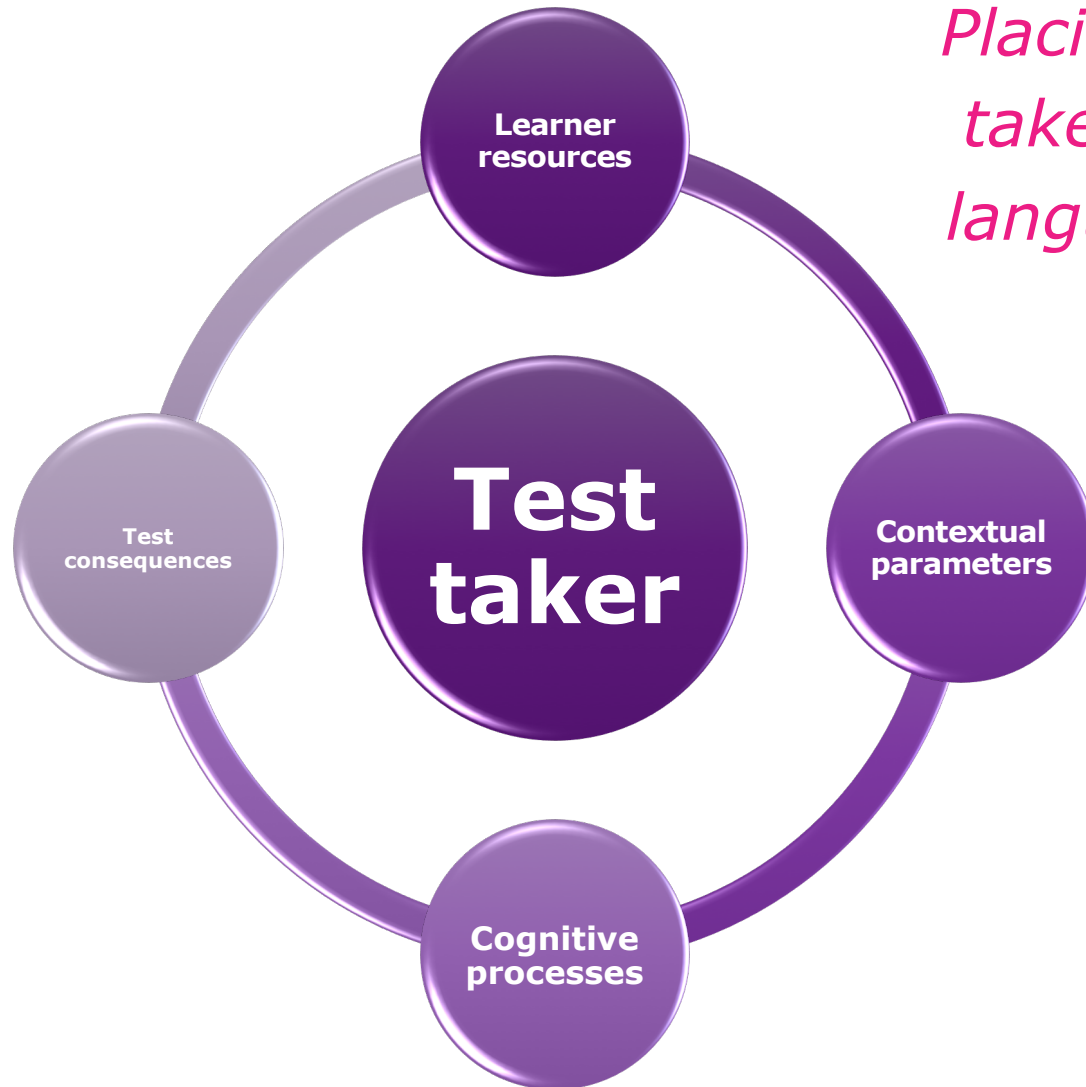
# Contemporary assessment: Socio-cognitive framework



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

(Weir 2005f)

# Contemporary assessment: Placing test-taker at centre of test



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

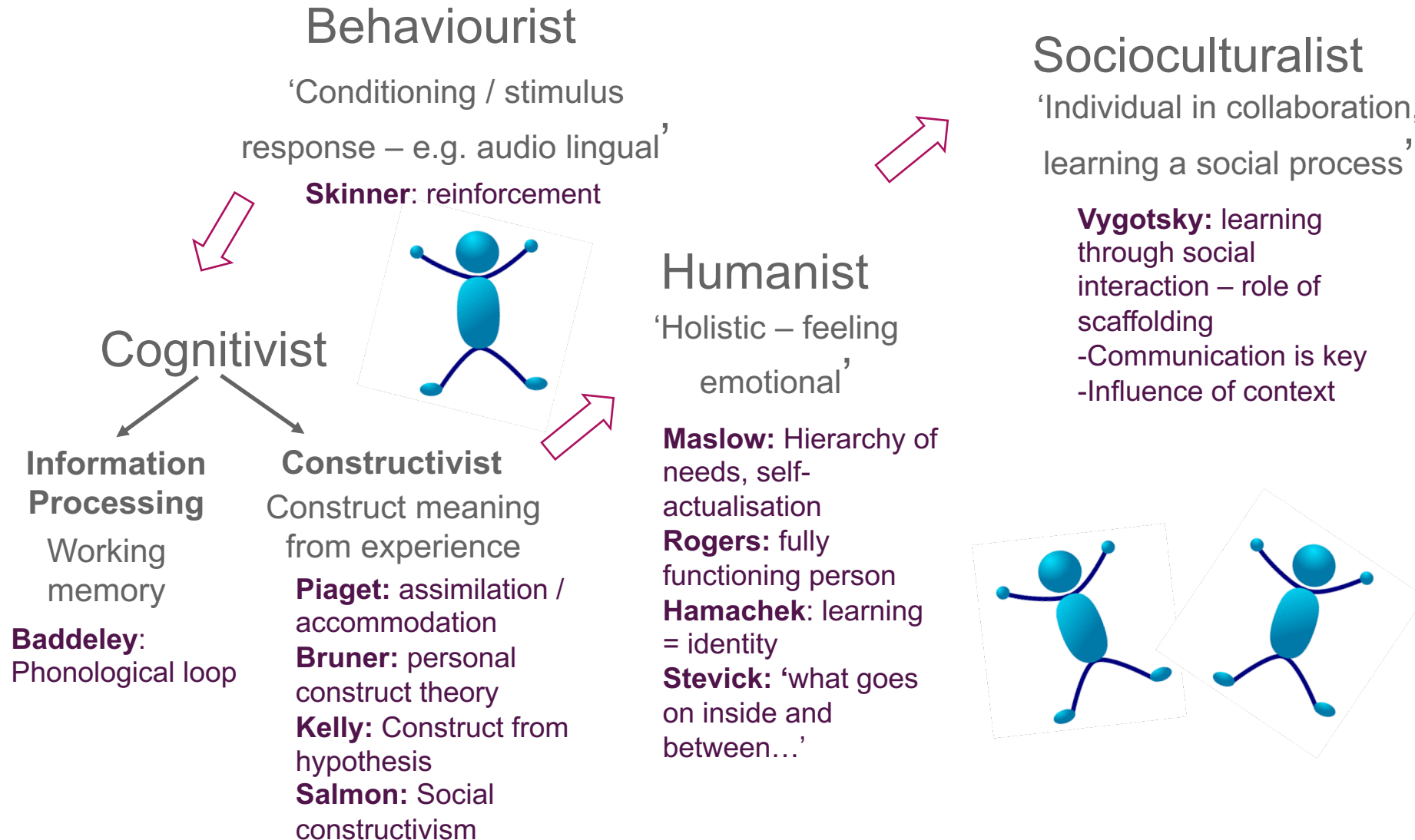
*(O'Sullivan 2011)*

- Do contemporary high-stakes exams engage test-taker as a psychological entity?
- Note – from perspective of test taker not test developer

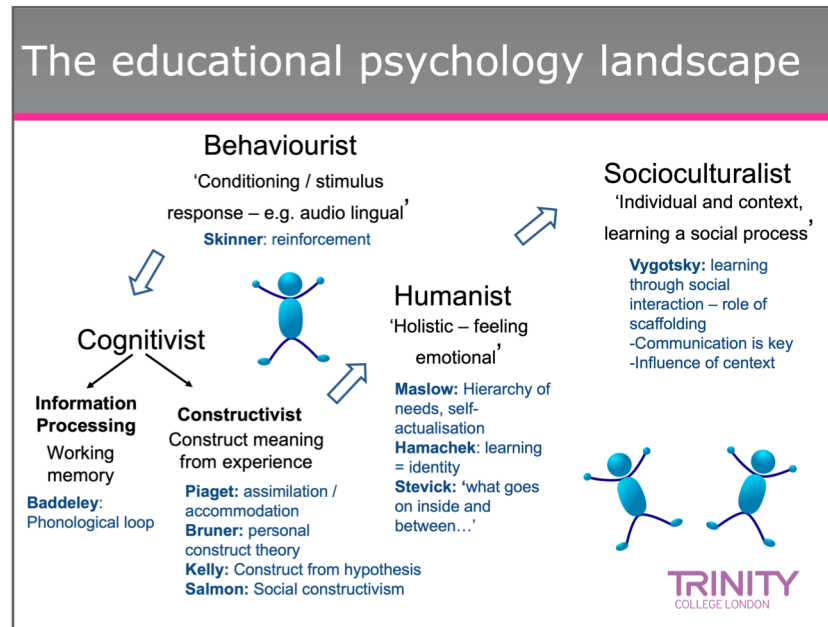


# Psychology - landscape

# The educational psychology landscape



# The educational psychology landscape

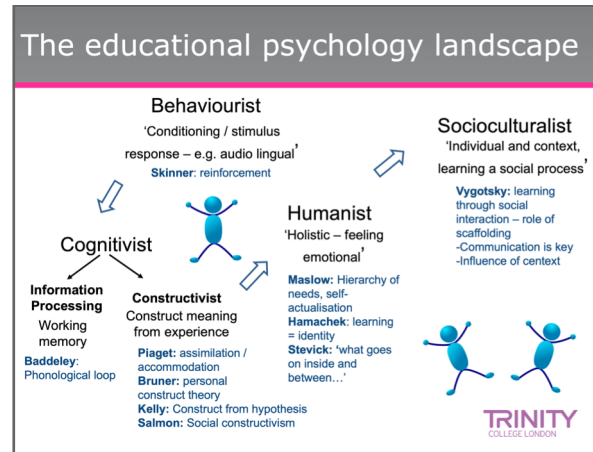


## Complexity perspective

'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

# The psychology landscape



Deficit perspectives

‘Addressing dysfunction – reducing misery and despair’

Potentiality perspectives

‘Facilitate a meaningful life, realise potential, maximise well being’

Positive Psychology

# Positive psychology in language assessment

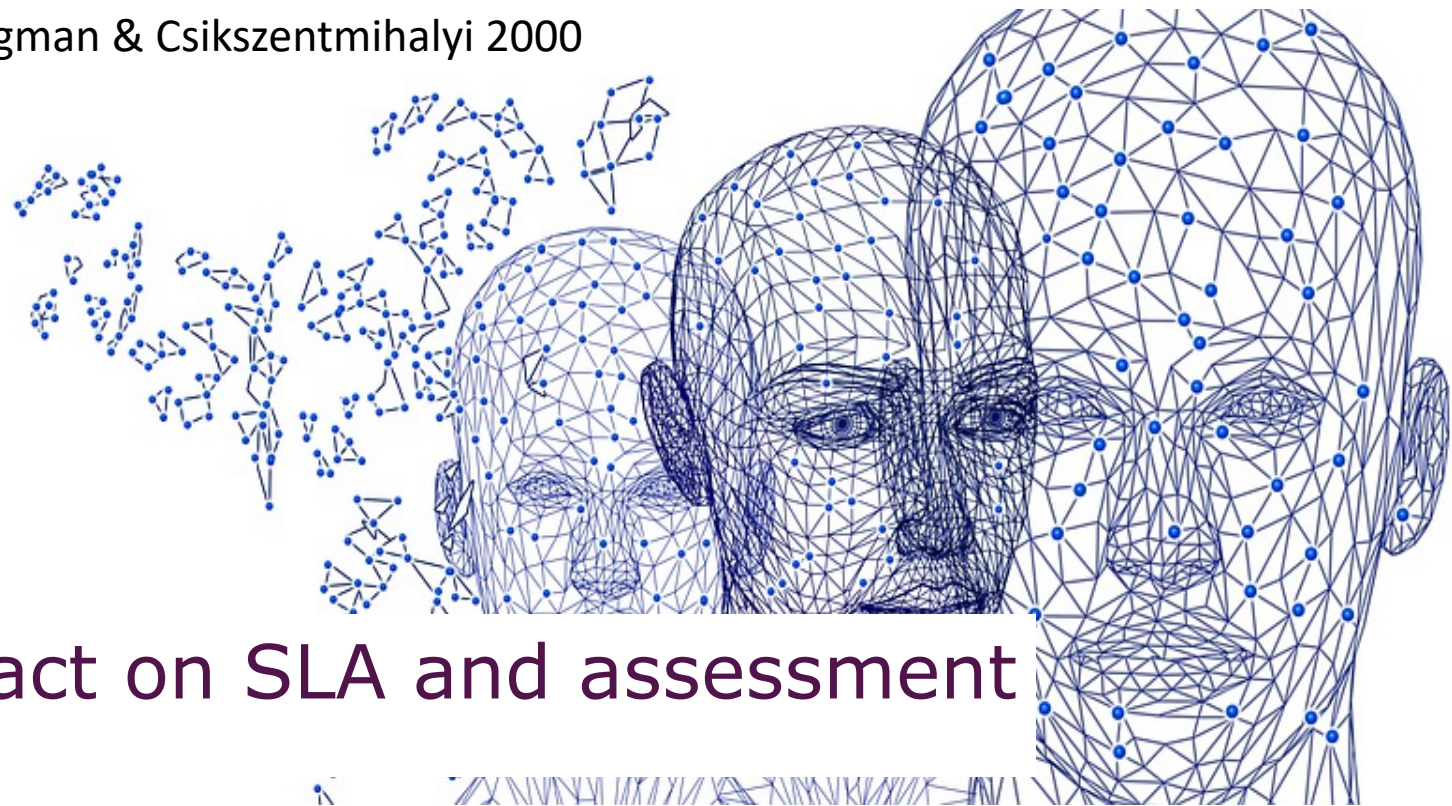
## What is positive psychology?

"... 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

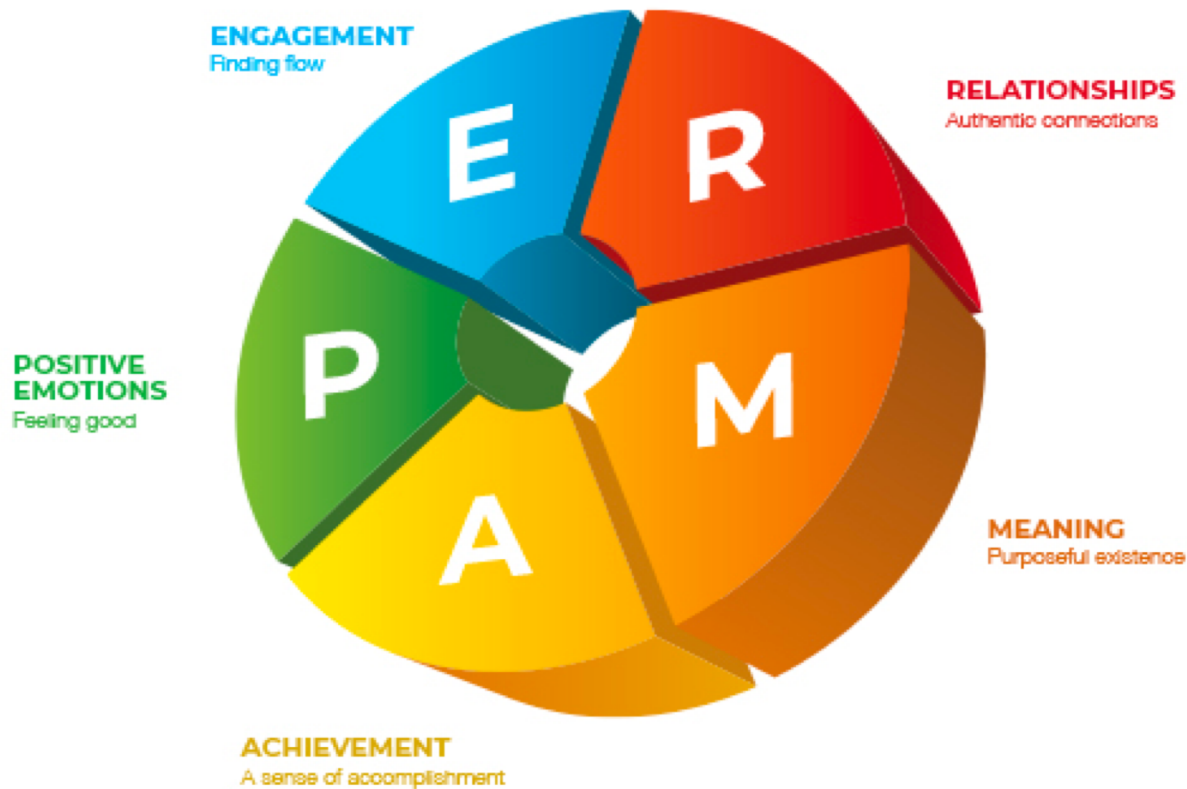
## Evidenced impact on SLA and assessment





# Insights into positive psychology

## PERMA model of well being (Seligman 2011)

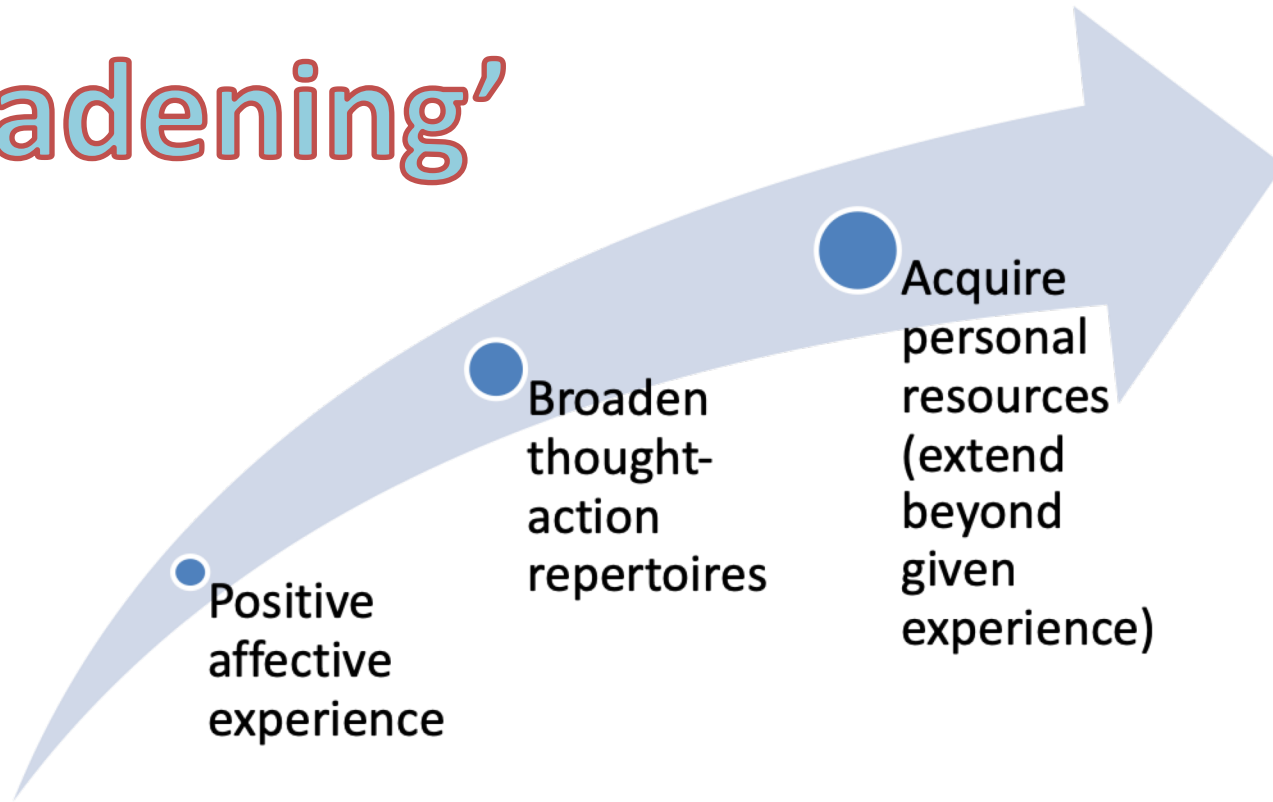


## Classroom application

PERMA provides tools to truly engage in humanistic language teaching  
(Helgesen 2016)

# Positive Psychology - Positive Emotions

'Broadening'

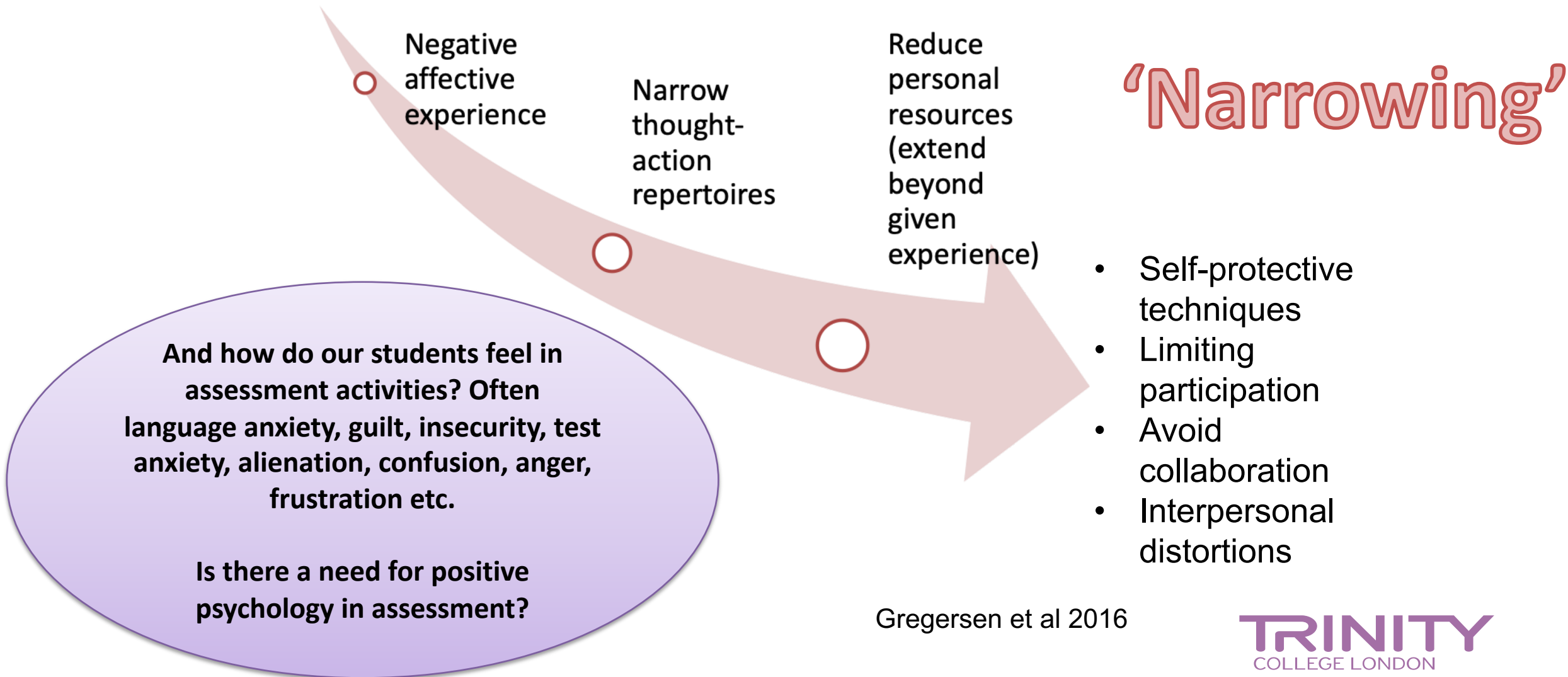


- increase learning potential
- techniques for coping and resiliency
- formation of adaptive spirals (feeling, thinking, acting)

Gregersen et al 2016

Results in the building of **social capital**

# Positive Psychology – Negative Emotions



# HERO model - Positive Psychological Capital

**Positive Organisational Behaviour**  
[Luthans 2002]

*'psychological states that are open to development and have impact on desired (employee) attitudes, behaviours, and performance'*



What met scientific inclusion criteria:

**Four psychological 'resources'**

Classroom  
application

# Explanatory style (Seligman)

## EXPLANATORY STYLE

### PESSIMISTIC THINKING STYLE

**PERMANENT**

*THIS WILL LAST FOREVER*

**PERVASIVE**

*THIS IS GOING TO UNDERMINE EVERYTHING*

**PERSONAL**

*IT'S ME. IT'S MY FAULT*

**UNCONTROLLABLE**

*THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT*

### OPTIMISTIC THINKING STYLE

**TEMPORARY**

*THIS WILL PASS*

**LOCAL**

*RELATES TO JUST THIS ONE SITUATION*

**NOT PERSONAL**

*THIS IS NOT (ENTIRELY) MY FAULT*

**CONTROLLABLE**

*THERE IS SOMETHING I CAN DO*

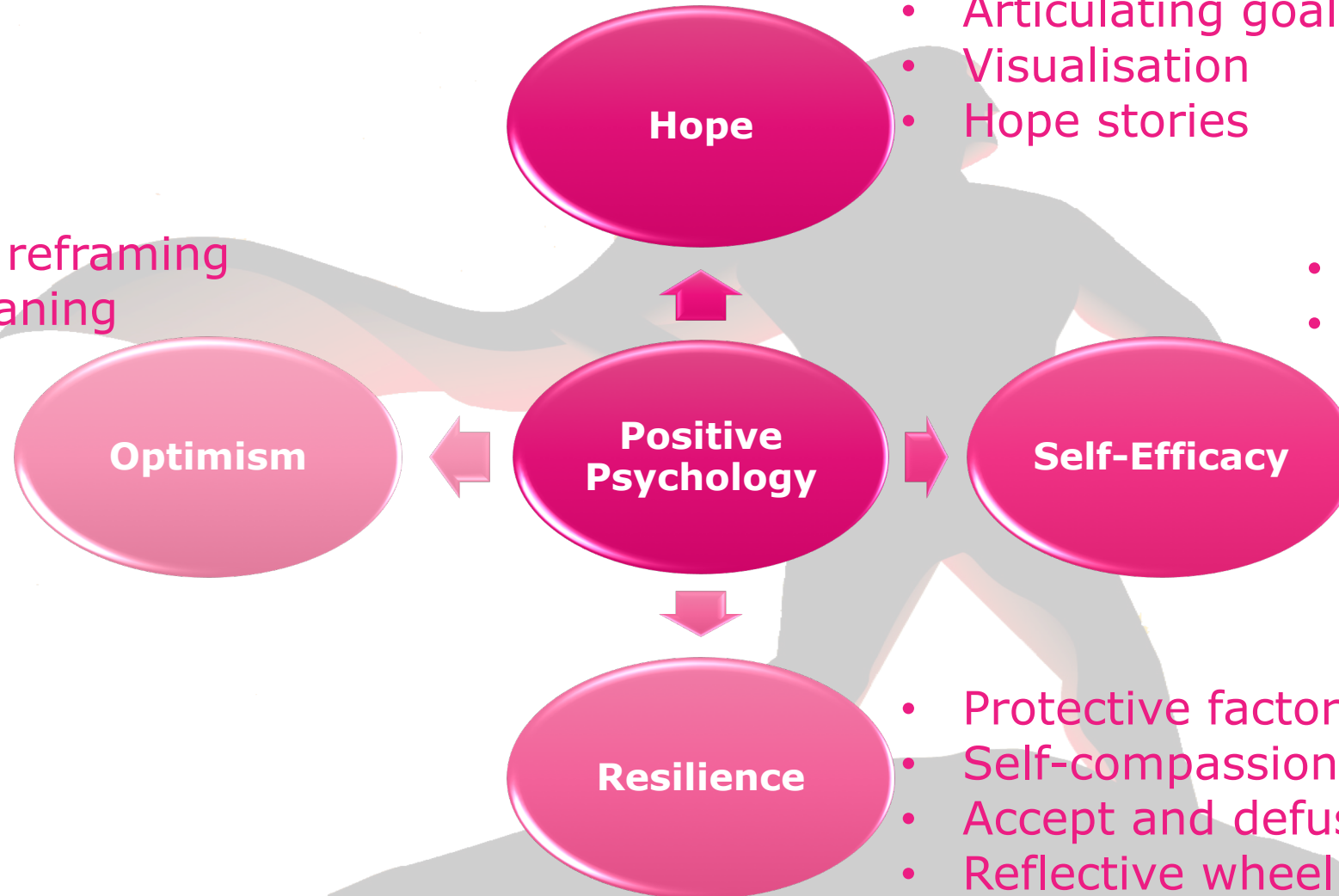


# Positive psychology and assessment

Can developing Positive Psychological Capital facilitate learning and improve performance in assessment tasks?

# HERO model - Example activities for the test-taker

- Disney chairs
- Acceptance / reframing
- Generate meaning



- Intro Pathway / agency model
- Articulating goals – monitor
- Visualisation
- Hope stories

- Success exemplar
- Possible selves

- Protective factors
- Self-compassion emails
- Accept and defuse
- Reflective wheel



# Positive psychology and assessment design and delivery

How can Positive Psychology inform assessment design and delivery



# Manifestations of Positive Psychological Capital



How does the manifestation of PPCs (associated traits) in performance-based assessment tasks impact results?



- **Hope**
- **Self-Efficacy**
- **Resilience**
- **Optimism**



Beware: Construct Irrelevant Variance (CIV) – more research needed.

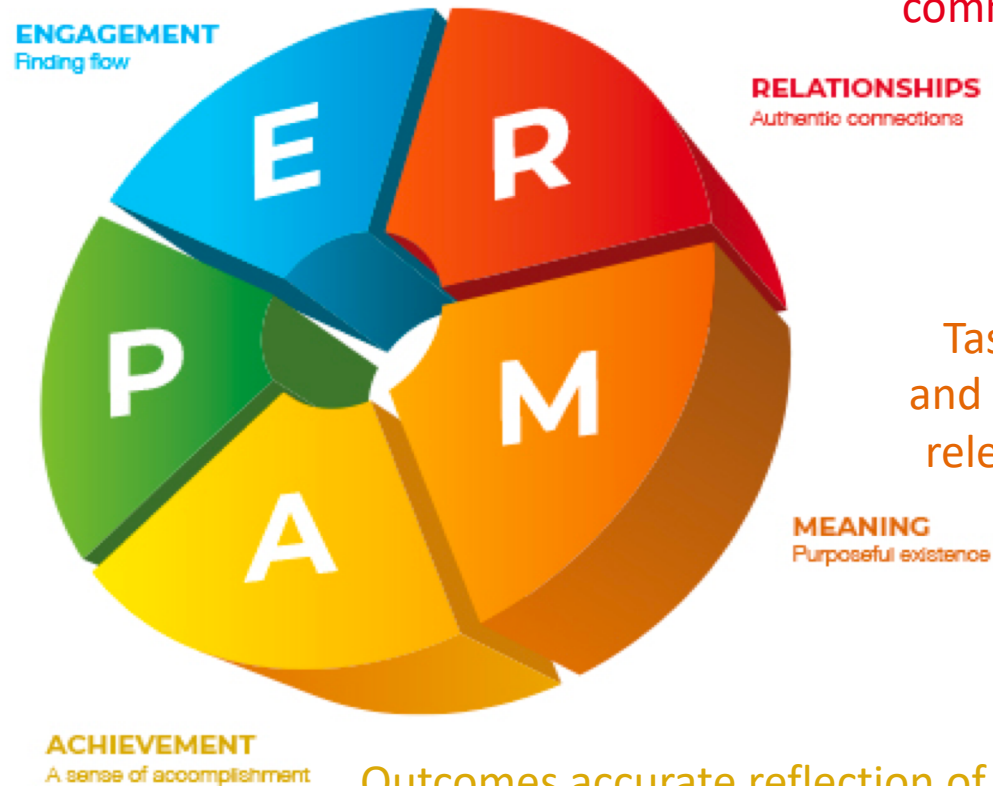
# Insights into positive psychology

## 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

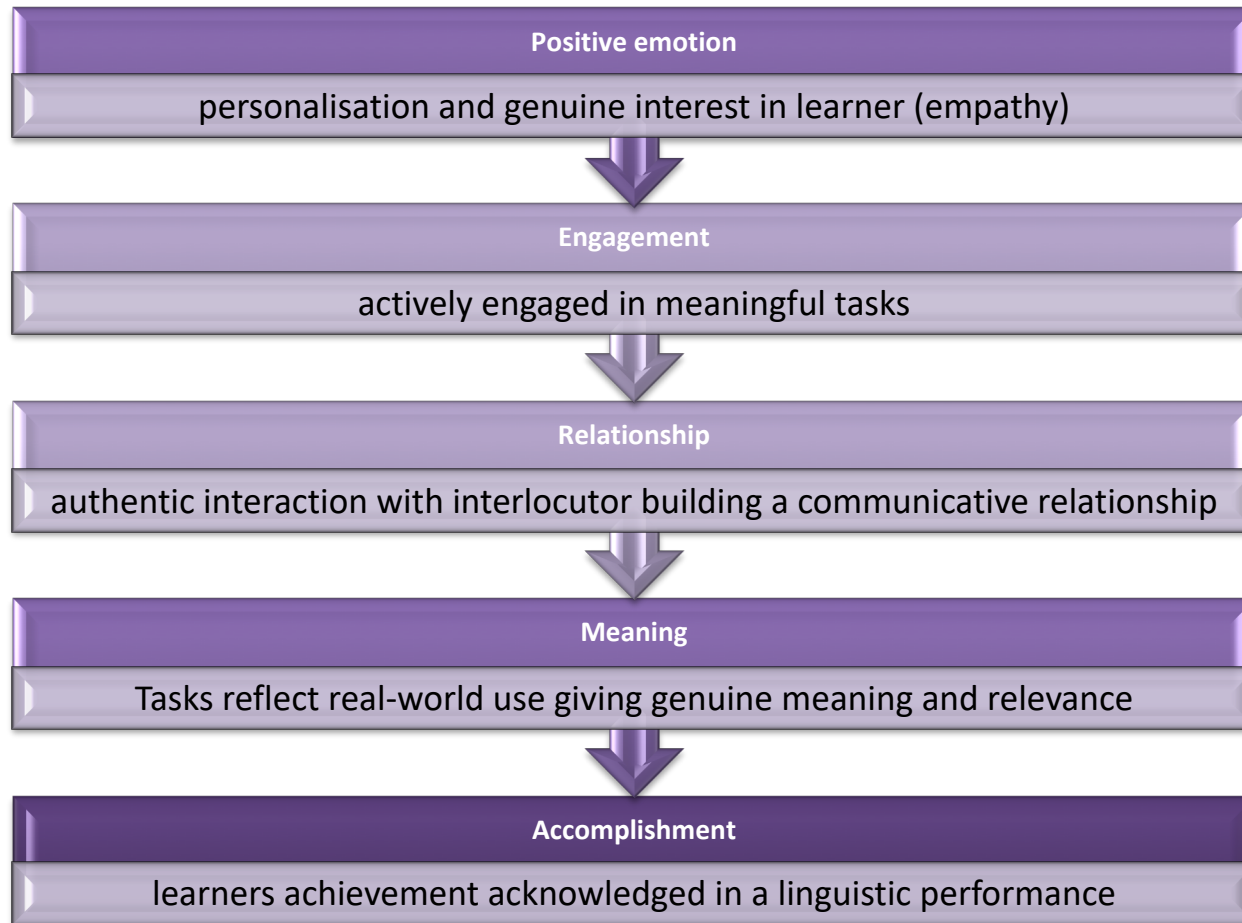


Tasks reflect real-world use and give genuine meaning and relevance to life of candidate

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

# Insights into positive psychology (PERMA 2011)

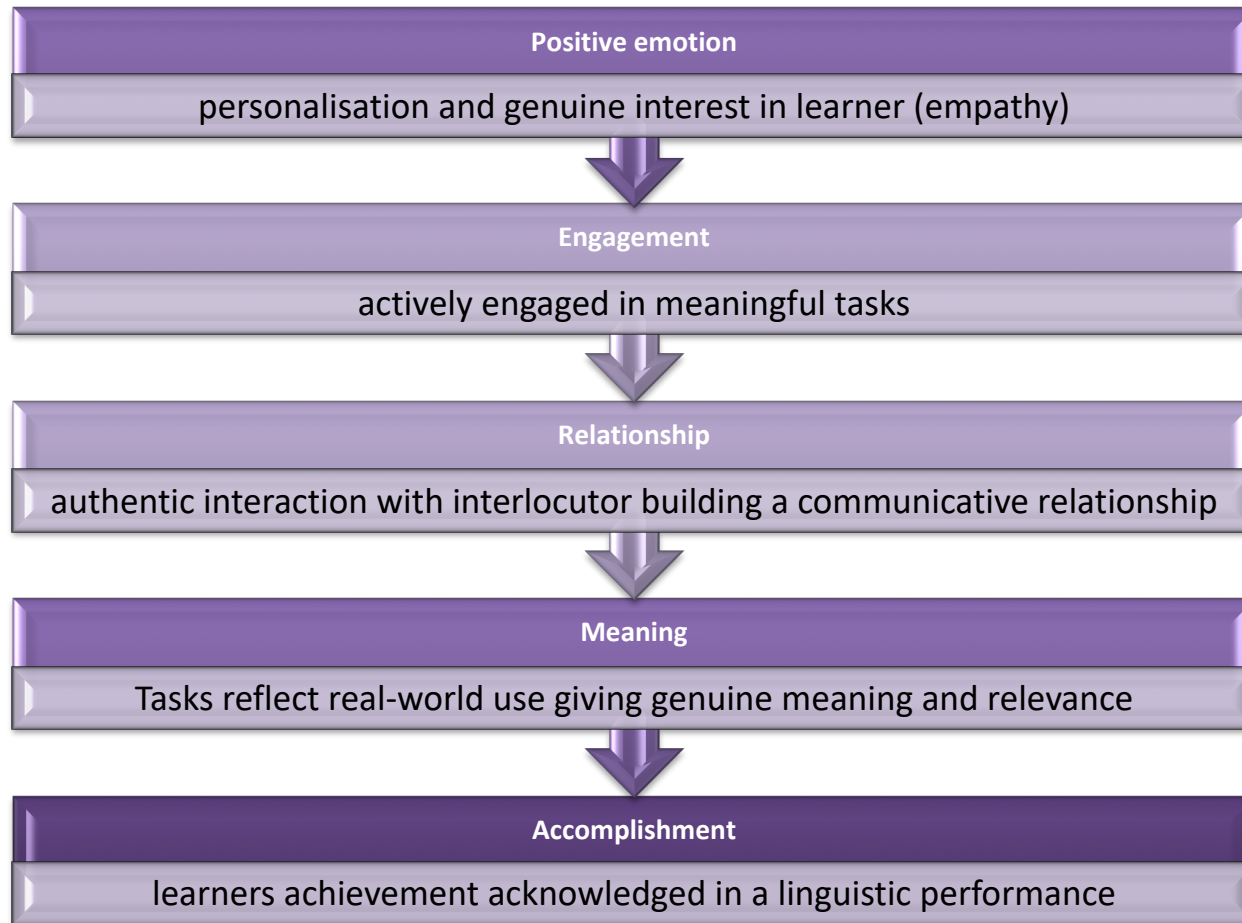
## PERMA model applied to assessment



Given topic to give monologic performance	Select personal topic for dialogic discussion

# Insights into positive psychology (PERMA 2011)

## PERMA model applied to assessment



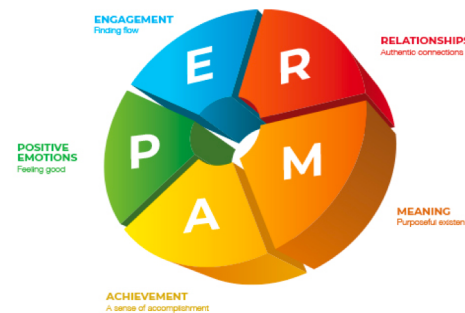
Given topic to give monologic performance	Select personal topic for dialogic discussion
✘ / ?	✓
✘ / ?	✓
✘ / ?	✓
✘ / ?	✓
✓	✓

# Summary – The psychology of assessment



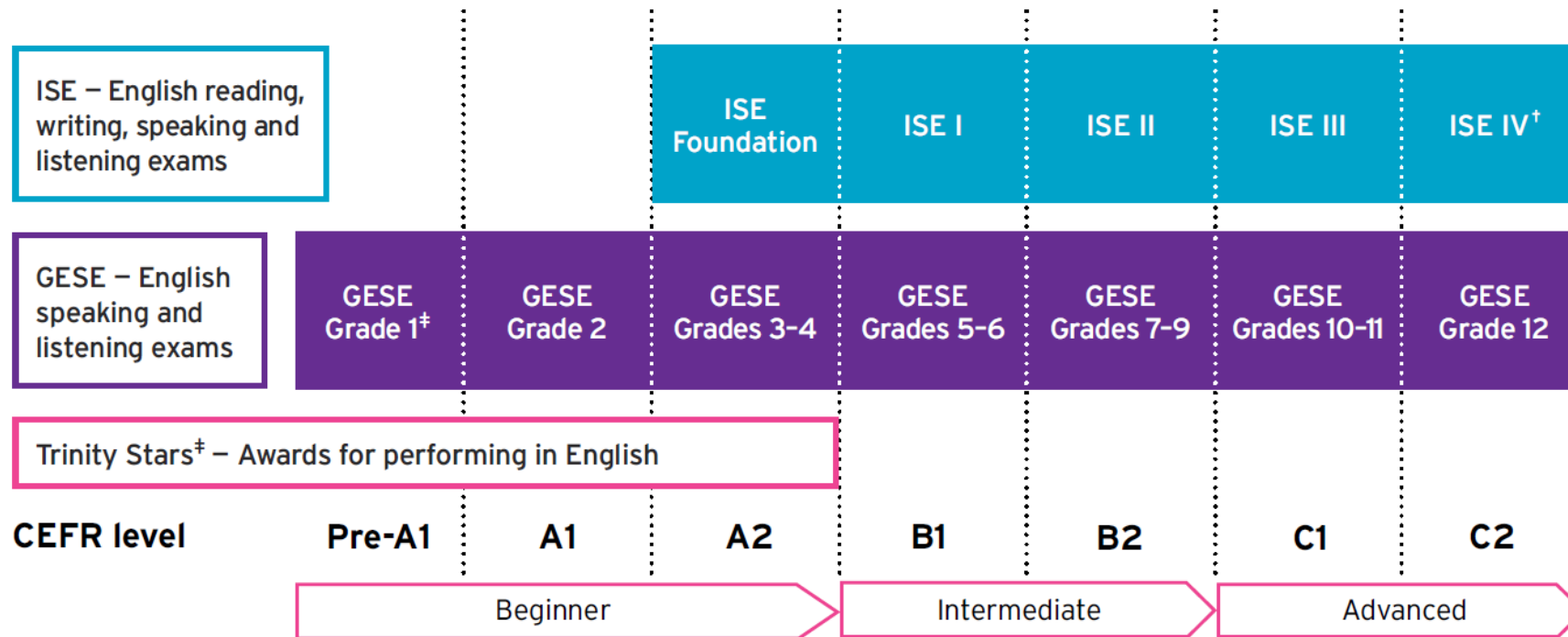
Not about a feel-good ‘happiology’ – rather authentic engagement with the test-taker as a psychological individual to facilitate the best possible performance in a test task.

Models available to audit tests and items – are they fit for purpose?



# Trinity – A communicative pathway

## Personalisation in every task



<sup>†</sup>ISE IV (C2) has a different format | <sup>‡</sup>Not mapped to the CEFR | CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference

CEFR = Common European Framework of reference

# The Psychology of Assessment

Alex Thorp, Trinity College London  
[alex.thorp@trinitycollege.com](mailto:alex.thorp@trinitycollege.com)

The Future of English Language  
Teaching Conference **ONLINE**

**#FoELT**

# Selected references

- Csikszentmihalyi, M.** (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. NY: Harper & Row
- Davis, B., & Sumara, D.** (2006). *Complexity and education: Inquiries into learning, teaching and research*. NY: Routledge
- Dornyei, Z.** (2009). *The psychology of second language acquisition*. OUP
- Dornyei, Z., & Ryan, S.** (2015). *The psychology of the language learner revisited*. NY: Routledge
- Dweck, C.** (2006). *Mindset: the new psychology of success*. NY: Random House
- Holiday, A.** (1994). *Appropriate methodology and social context*. CUP
- Mercer, S., Ryan, S., Williams, M.** (2015) *Exploring psychology in Language learning and teaching*. OUP
- MacIntyre, P. D., Gregersen, T., & Mercer, S.** (Eds.). (2016). *Positive psychology in SLA*. Multilingual Matters.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Mercer, S.** (2014). Introducing positive psychology to SLA. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 153-172.
- Rogers, C.** (2002). The interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning. *Supporting lifelong learning*, 1, 25-39.
- Seligman, M.E.P., Gillham, J., Reivich, K. Linkins, M., Ernst, R.** (2009). Positive Education. *Oxford Review of Education*. 35(3), 293-311
- Stevick, E. W.** (1976). *Memory, Meaning and Method: Some Psychological Perspectives on Language Learning*.
- Stevick, E.W.** (1980). *Teaching languages. A way and ways*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House



## This session has now ended

We hoped that you enjoyed this presentation. Please continue to  
your next session at:

[www.learn.trinitycollege.co.uk/FoELT-event](http://www.learn.trinitycollege.co.uk/FoELT-event)