

# ***HOW RELEVANT IS SLA RESEARCH FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING? A CRITICAL APPRAISAL***

**LOURDES ORTEGA**

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa



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# **1. Research, teaching, application, relevance...**



# Borg's (2010) on language teachers' research engagement:

engagement **IN** teacher research (i.e., by doing it)

engagement **WITH** research (i.e., by reading and using it)

Often, a **technical** approach: offering tools for doing/reading research

Also **technical** solutions for researchers: strategies for dissemination/translating research

# My focus today:

Teachers'  
engagement  
with research

Researchers'  
support of useful  
research

**goal:** offering tools for thinking more  
positively about the topic...

**Reciprocally, teachers &  
researchers**

# Reciprocally, teachers & researchers

## Larsen-Freeman (2009):

“[...] when arguments are made for teaching and research to be more aligned, usually it is for the purpose of encouraging teachers to make use of what researchers have to offer teachers by way of insights into language or its learning. [...] however, [...] researchers would benefit from viewing learning the way that teachers do. [...] In a true relationship, there is reciprocity.” (p. 5)



# **Researchers and Teachers of Language:**

**How do they view  
each other?**

# Teachers...?



**Action-oriented**

**Practical**

**Specific, concrete**

**Experiential knowledge**

**An art**

# Researchers...?



**Thought-oriented**

**Theoretical**

**General, abstract**

**Detached knowledge**

**Science**



# How relevant is SLA research for L2 teaching?

**Teachers: Little-to-no use, difficult to  
access/understand, enjoy, believe,  
adapt-adopt...**

e.g., Clarke (1994), Borg (2010) and much of the research cited there  
Although also Allwright (2005), Erlam (2008)...



# How relevant is SLA research for L2 teaching?

**Researchers:** Famous “Apply with Caution” dictum by Second Language Acquisition founder Evelyn Hatch

Hatch, E. (1978). Apply with caution. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 2, 123-143.

Also: Clarke (1994), Han (2007), R. Ellis (2010)



**Whence the  
mistrust and  
caution?**



**Partly, from the  
metaphor of  
“application”**

# The metaphor of **application**: Top-down



**Teacher = responsible technician:**  
**Pedagogy knowledge is “less”**  
**Research knowledge “improves” it**

**Researcher = well-intended but cautious expert:**

**It is good if research has some social value →**

- make it “reach” teachers through “translation” efforts

**But →**

- Too much attention to application may harm research
- Faking application value into research may be dishonest

# A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE...



For me, application is a counterproductive metaphor,  
and “**relevance**” needs to be taken seriously

Apply



Search for relevance

With caution



With critical agency  
and reciprocity

# Some assumptions

**Teachers and researchers must negotiate their relation from a position of difference-in-equality (or reciprocity)**

**Teachers are agentic** (Roberts & Graham, 2008) and **deliberative** (Scarino, 2005)...

... they have good & critical judgment to critically appraise the relevance of research

# Second Language Acquisition Research can...

1.... sharpen teaching

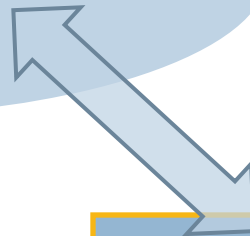
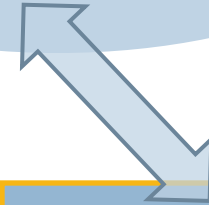
2.... invigorate teachers

3.... fall short of really being relevant (yet)

Motivation

Aptitude

Error Correction



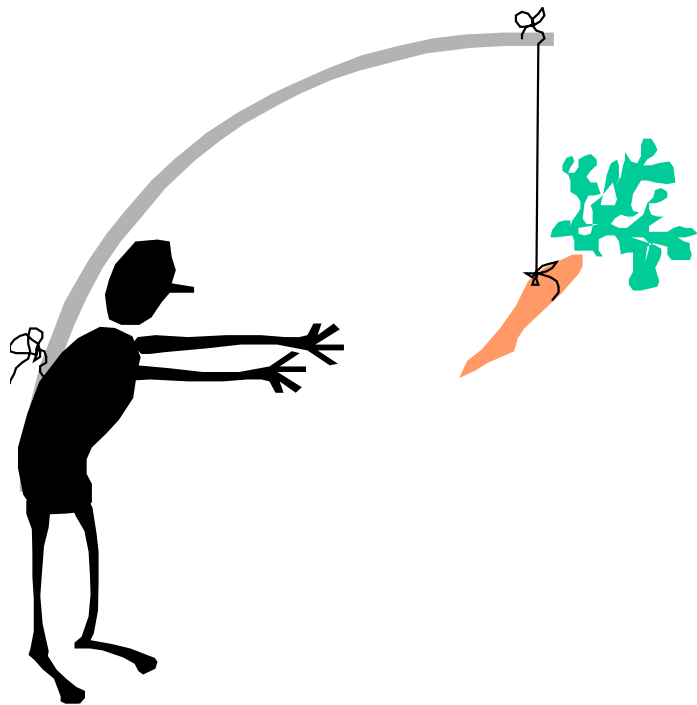


***Instead of struggling  
over application***

***Teachers & Researchers:  
Search for relevance with  
critical agency!***

**2. Research can sharpen  
what teachers already  
know and do best...**





**e.g.,**

**L2 LEARNING MOTIVATION**

**teaching-research synergy**

**TEACHERS ATTEND TO AND  
KNOW BEST HOW TO  
MOTIVATE THEIR  
STUDENTS...**

**AND RESEARCHERS  
KNOW IT!**



# Research on teacher motivational strategies... Guilloteaux & Dörnyei (2008)

- **27 teachers, 1,300 students, South Korea, no special teacher training**

Creativity and fantasy to connect with students' interest

Personalizing opportunities to express, experiences, feelings, opinions

Setting tangible task products (poster, brochure)

Giving feedback free from irritation or personal criticism

- **Teacher motivational practice strongly related to student motivational behavior ( $r=0.60$  or 37% of variance)**

**BUT ALSO, STUDENTS ARE  
MOTIVATED BY SURPRISINGLY  
DIFFERENT THINGS**

**AND RESEARCH CAN HELP  
TEACHERS MAKE BETTER  
SENSE OF THESE  
DIFFERENCES**



**Illustrations from my own students  
in third-year Spanish at a U.S.  
university, enrolled in a grammar  
& composition course in the late  
1990s (Ortega, 2009a)**

**Journal writing: (1) Accomplishments thus far and goals until the end of the semester; (2) Their language learning strategies**

# Integrative motivation...

Helen:

"Tengo que aprender mucho para ser más capaz de comunicar bien con hispanohablantes. Mi sueño es tener un dominio del español semejante a un hispanohablante."

"I need to learn a lot to be better at communicating well with Spanish-speaking people. My dream is to attain a mastery of Spanish similar to that of a Spanish speaking person."


# Instrumental motivation...



Mike:

“... He estado perezoso ... y lo esta perjudicado mi nota en este clase, cuando tuvo una buena nota al principio de este clase. Yo quiero reparar la nota. Y las cosas concretas que puedo hacer para ayudarme en este caso es hacer mi tarea con mas pasion y interes para puedo aprenderlo.”

“... I've been lazy ... and this has damaged my grades in this class, whereas I had good grades at the beginning of this class. I want to repair my grades. And the concrete things I can do to help myself in this case is to do my homework with more passion and interest so I can learn.”

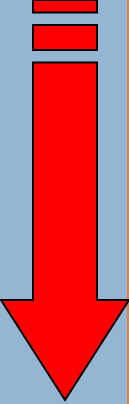


**Anything else, beyond the  
integrative – instrumental  
motivation dichotomy that most  
teachers know?**

# Advancements in L2 learning

## motivation theory (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011)



Traditional Gardner/Canada	Self-Determination Noels/North America	Ideal Self Dörnyei/Europe	Investment Norton/Immigrants
<p><b><u>Integrative</u></b> (language &amp; sociopolitical attitudes, educational experiences)</p>	<p><b><u>Intrinsic</u></b> <b>Identified</b> <b>Introjected</b> <b>Extrinsic</b> <b>Amotivation</b></p> <p>(pleasure &amp; enjoyment vs. imposition)</p> 	<p><b><u>Image of self as L2 speaker</u> + Imagined instrumental value</b></p> <p>(Ideal self image versus real self and desire to narrow the gap between the two)</p>	<p><b><u>Imagined value of L2 for material and symbolic improvement</u></b></p> <p>(particularly in contexts of power differential)</p>

# Intrinsic motivation...



Liz:

**“Me gusta este clase mucho porque me gusta escribir. La gente piensa que yo estoy extraña pero es la verdad. No me gusta escribir estoy escribiendo. Pero cuando estoy terminado, me gustalo!”**

**“I like this [Spanish grammar and composition] class very much because I like writing. People think I am odd but it is true. I don't like writing while writing. But when I am done, I like it!”**

# Identified motivation...

Phil:

“Yo sé que los estudiantes de español no les gustan el pretérito y el imperfecto, pero es importante practicarlos para mejorarse. Creo que es muy mal que todavía no puedo distinguir entre el pretérito y el imperfecto bien después de estudiarlos por casi dos semestres. Es muy difícil, y por lo tanto quiero conquistarlos!”

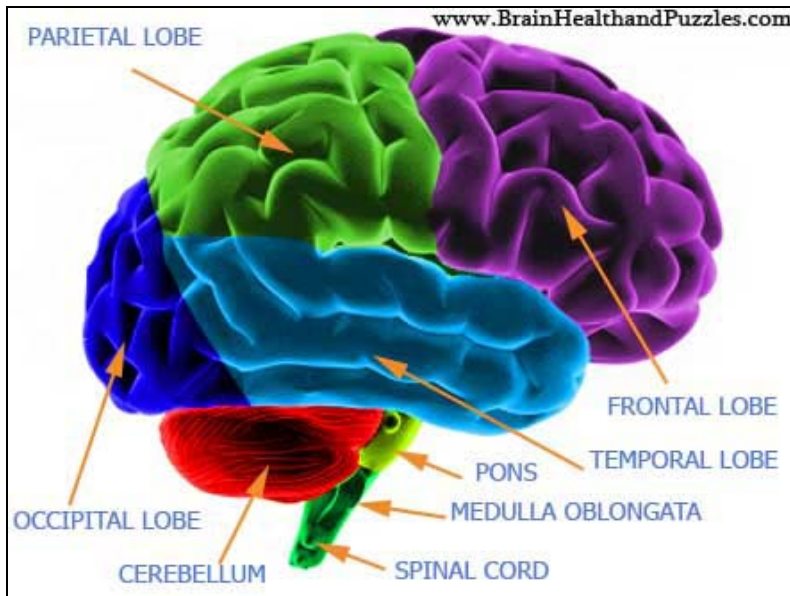
“I know Spanish students don't like the preterit and the imperfect, but it is important to practice them in order to improve. I think it is really bad that I still cannot distinguish well between the preterit and the imperfect after having studied them for almost two semesters. They are very difficult, and therefore I want to master them!”

**Research** → Different students will “be moved” by specific different qualities of motivation

**Relevance!** Teachers must be alert towards identifying what motivates different students and cater for variety in their motivational practices

**3. Research can  
invigorate teachers  
where they may feel  
powerless...**





**e.g.,**

**L2 LEARNING APTITUDE**

**research guiding practice**

**TEACHERS OFTEN FEEL  
POWERLESS TOWARDS  
NATURAL 'GIFT' /  
'INABILITY' FOR  
LANGUAGE LEARNING...**

**AND RESEARCHERS  
CAN HELP!**



## Intuitive notions that may contribute to teachers' feelings about aptitude:



- ❑ Language aptitude is genetic (we're born with it)
- ❑ It has to do with intelligence, good memory, or a musical ear
- ❑ It's fixed
- ❑ It's "either or": Either one has it, or one doesn't

**So... there is little teachers can do about it...!?**

# Some research insights

(summarized in Ortega, 2009b):



- **True, natural talent exists: Aptitude differences are a considerably good predictor of ease and rate of formal L2 learning** ( $r=0.40-0.60$ , 16%-36% variance)
- **It is quite related to verbal talent in the L1** (e.g., Dufva & Voeten, 1999; Sparks, 2006)
- **But also: Two important facets are memory ability and analytical ability**
- **That is, aptitude is multidimensional** (Robinson, 2005; Skehan, 2002)

# Aptitude is multidimensional

(Ortega, 2009b):



## Memory

Benefits must be qualified:

→ Lexical acquisition in early stages (Masoura & Gathercole, 2005) and grammatical acquisition in later stages (O'Brien et al., 2006)

→ More useful for formal regularities than semantic learning (Williams, 1999 vs. 2005)

## Analysis

Much less studied than memory

Is it related to academic training/  
education/literacy?

# “Aptitude complexes”

(Robinson, 2005; Skehan, 2002)



**++ memory  
++ analysis**

**++ memory  
-- analysis**

**-- memory  
++ analysis**

**-- memory  
-- analysis**





**++ analysis**



**Joanna:**

...nueva por dividirla en las  
... conocidos para buscar un significado.  
Siempre busco a unas semejanzas y unos contrastos entre  
español y inglés y también a unas estructuras de las frases.”

“I try to analyze each new word by dividing it into syllables or known parts in order to find a meaning. I always look for similarities and differences between Spanish and English and also for the structure in phrases.”

**++ memory**  
**-- analysis**

**Brad:**

... recordar el vocabulario muy facilmente y conservar el.  
Pero con gramatica, y cuando para utilizar ciertos verbos, yo  
tengo uno muy, muy dificil tiempo recordando cuando para utilizar  
“la que” y si necesito “a” o “les” tengo que ser escribe.”

“I can easily remember the vocabulary and retain it, but with grammar, and when to use certain verbs, I have a really, really difficult time remembering when to use “la que” and if I need to use “a” or “les” when I write.”

**IF LANGUAGE APTITUDE IS  
A MULTIDIMENSIONAL  
PHENOMENON, NOT  
BINARY OR  
CATEGORICAL...**

**...TEACHERS DO HAVE  
SOME ROOM FOR ACTION!**



# Teacher's action, Profile 1:



- Include diverse activities and tasks that take advantage of excellent memory (e.g., Internet CMC, vocab games...)
- Give assignments/roles in assignments that capitalize on good memory and holistic approach
- Fine-tune explicit grammar instruction to help noticing, understand, etc when analytical skills are weak

**++ memory**  
**-- analysis**

Ortega (2009a)

# Teacher's action, Profile 2:



## Exactly the reverse tactics:

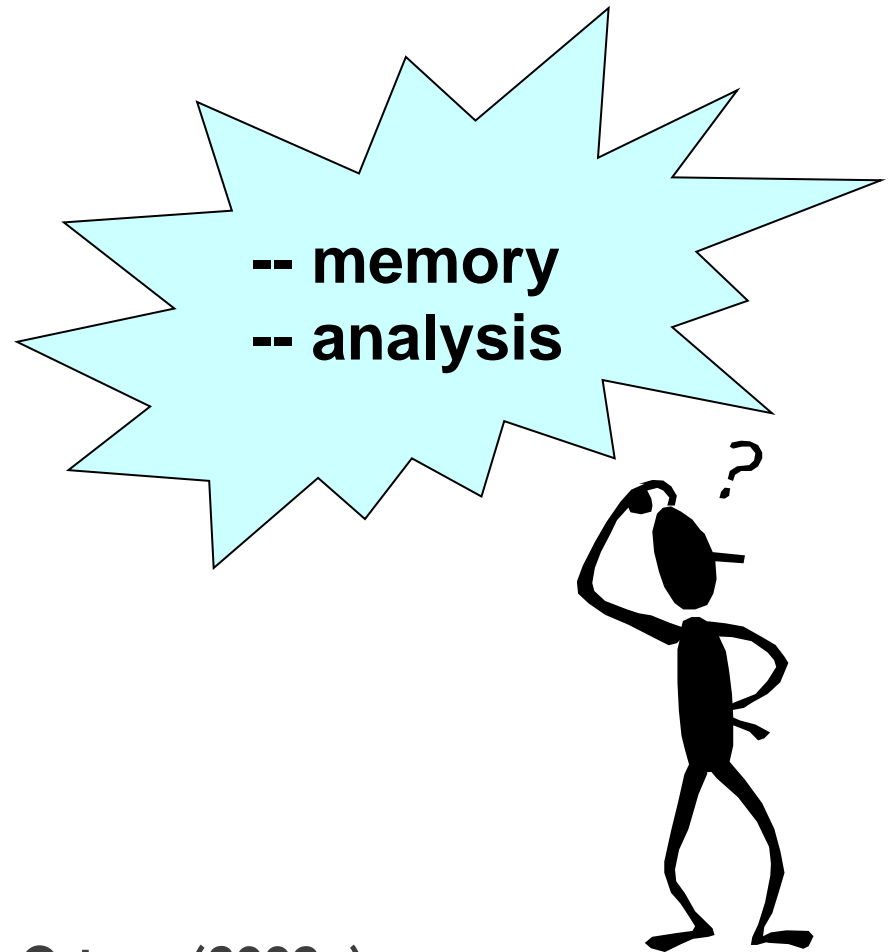
- Play to their analytical skills and grammatical sensitivity (e.g., grammar games, inductive activities, translation...)
- Support them with training in vocabulary learning strategies and compensatory communication strategies

-- memory  
++ analysis

# Teacher's action, Profile 3:



- Understand their goals and help them evaluate goals/achievements realistically while inspiringly
- Turn to motivation, find how to support them motivationally even more
- Assess and praise considering effort and individual achievement, not just outcomes and group norms

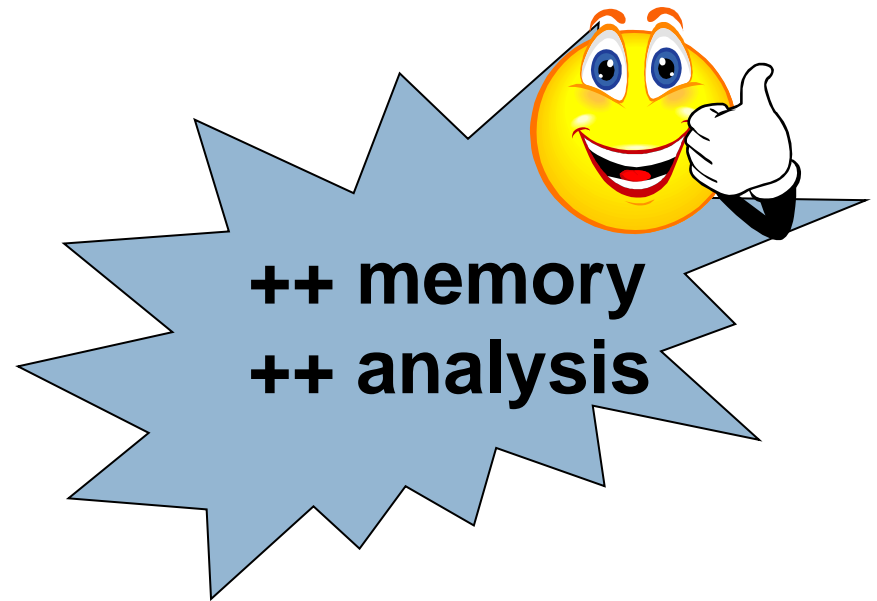


Ortega (2009a)

# Teacher's action, Profile 4:



- Provide them with sufficiently challenging instruction, or they may get demotivated and uninterested!



Ortega (2009a)

**Research** → Aptitude is not monolithic, binary, it's multidimensional (memory + analysis)

**Relevance!** Teachers can diversify pedagogy to cater to students with different combinations of strengths and weaknesses

**4. Sometimes, research  
must be critically put  
aside by teachers...**





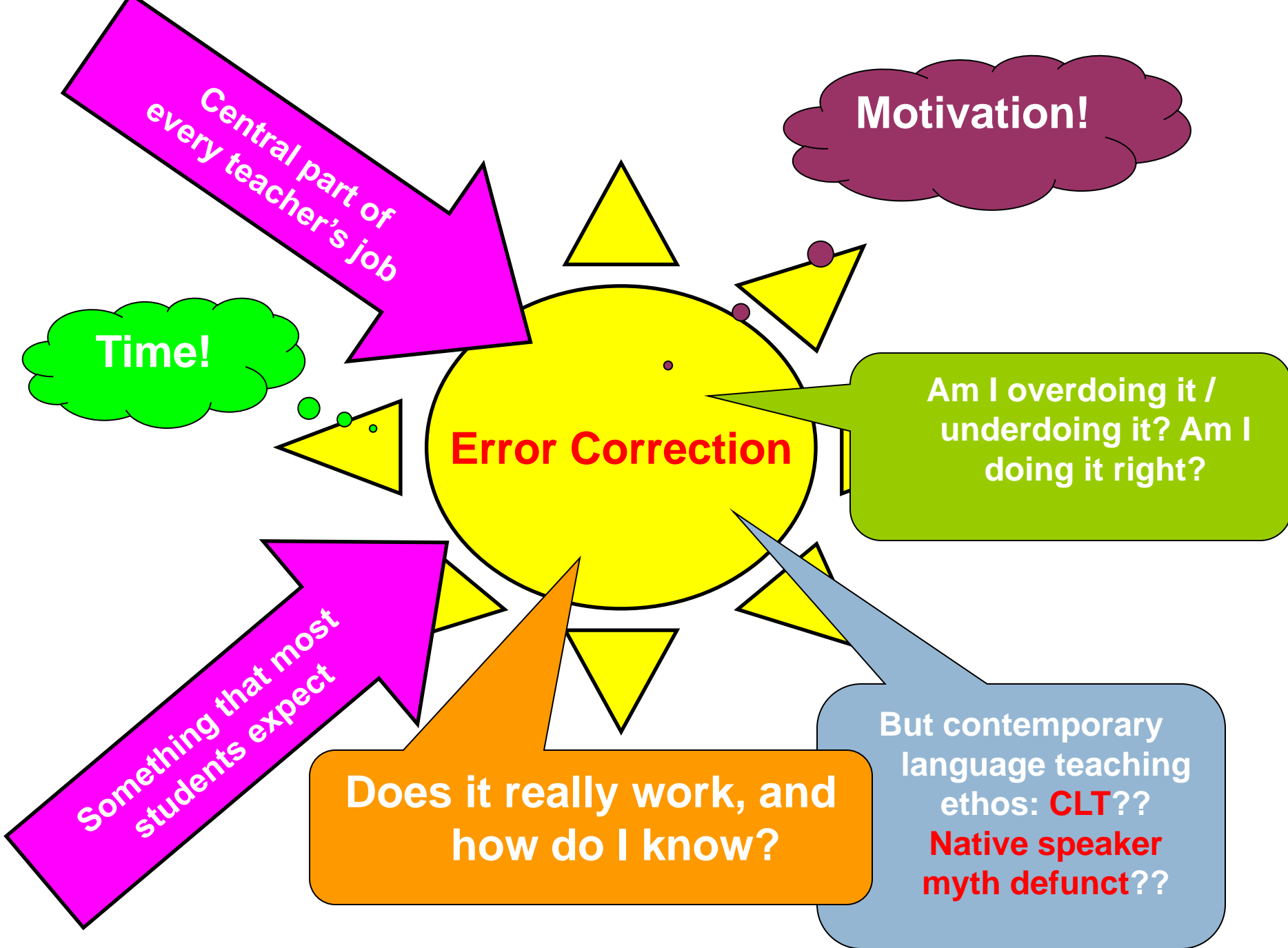
**e.g.,**

# **ERROR CORRECTION**

**research falling short of being  
relevant to teaching (yet)**

**MOST TEACHERS DO ERROR  
CORRECTION, BUT MOST  
ALSO WORRY ABOUT IT...**





Central part of every teacher's job

Motivation!

Time!

**Error Correction**

Am I overdoing it / underdoing it? Am I doing it right?

But contemporary language teaching ethos: **CLT??**  
**Native speaker myth defunct??**

Does it really work, and how do I know?

Something that most students expect

**MUCH RESEARCH EFFORT  
GOES INTO ERROR  
CORRECTION, BUT NO FIRM  
ANSWERS CAN BE OFFERED  
TO TEACHERS...**



# What's the research evidence on the effectiveness of EC?



## Arguments for pessimism:

**Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007)**

## Or skepticism at least

**Mackey et al. (2008)**

## Arguments for optimism:

**Bitchener (2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2010; Bitchener et al., 2005)**

**van Beuningen et al. (2008, forthcoming)**

**Aljaafreh & Nabei & Li (2010), (2010)**

**But the sum of research is inconclusive about the how's, what's, and why's of EC!**

## Rod Ellis' 10 principles of EC for teachers, e.g., #8:

“8. Teachers should be prepared to vary who, when, and how they correct in accordance with the cognitive and affective needs of the individual learner. In effect this means they do not need to follow a consistent set of procedures for all students.”

**No principle at**  
(2009, p. 14)

**all, then?**

# And... a bit of “teacher bashing”?



**Zamel (1985): Teachers give written comments that are too vague for students to understand**

Be careful with  
run-ons

Word form

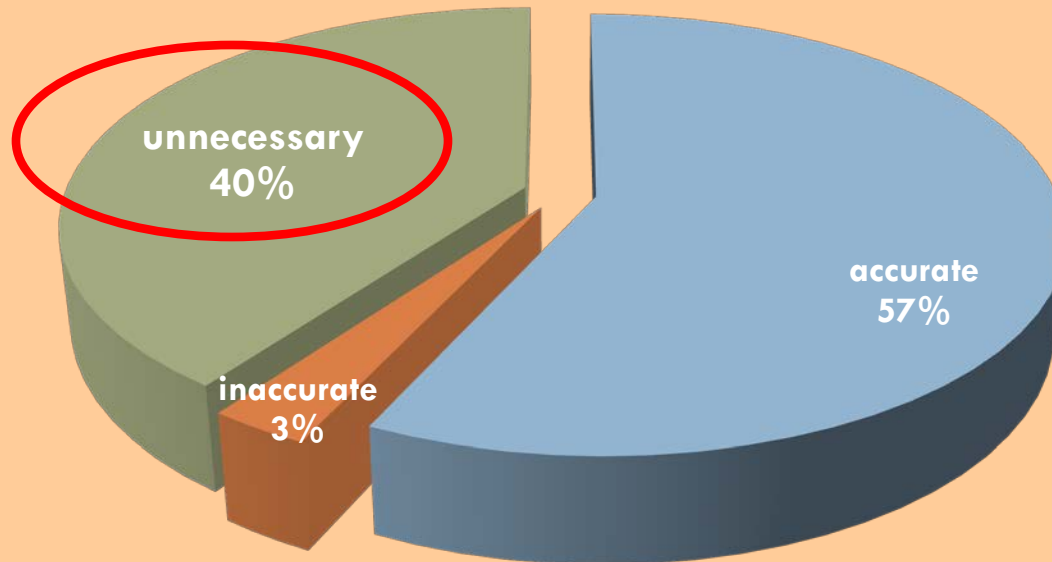
Wrong  
word

Can you say this  
more concisely?

What do you  
mean?



**Lee (2004): Teachers give many unnecessary extra corrections! (58 Hong Kong high school teachers on same essay)**





**Official, unchallenged story among instructed SLA researchers for decades now:** The empirical evidence suggests **language teachers behave inconsistently** when correcting errors during oral classroom interactions (e.g., Chaudron, 1988, p. 149; R. Ellis, 1990, p. 73).



**Recasts:** They are by far the **preferred** way for teachers to correct orally, **but** they may be **ambiguous** and ineffective in the classroom! (Lyster, 2004; Nicholas et al., 2001; Sheen, 2010)

Recast:

St: Where I can find informations about driver's license?

T: Where **can I** find **information** about **a** driver's license?

St: Yes.

(Schachter, 1981)



- **How can teachers be so wrong?**
- **Is error correction a blind spot of professional practice?**

**NO, THIS RESEARCH IS  
UNACCOUNTABLE TO THE  
COMPLEXITY OF ERROR  
CORRECTION PRACTICES...  
WHICH SOME OTHER RESEARCH  
HAS BEGUN TO SHOW**





- **Socially oriented perspectives and research on EC in L2 writing:**
- **e.g., Hyland & Hyland (2006), Goldstein (2004), Storch & Wigglesworth (2010)**

**Error correction  
in context**

**Identity  
Agency  
Affect**

## **Identity**

**From an ESL teacher's journal:**

**“Once I had a student who kept saying “I came from Korea.” I tried to correct her grammar by saying “if you are originally from Korea, you should use present tense when you refer to it.”**

**She said “Since I don’t want to go back to Korea and identify myself with American, I’d rather say I came from Korea and wish to be an American one day.””**

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## Agency

From Cohen & Robbins (1976):

**Eva** (China born, moved to Australia at 16 and to the US at 19):

**“I have never start anything from ABCD. Everything is always skip, skip, skip since I've been going so many places... I wasn't taught the way a person is supposed to be taught. I wasn't taught in the right way, so that is why some of the grammars were never drill into me”**

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## Affect:

**Samorn**, Thai graduate student over 30, doing a degree in business:

"At the first time I think that my writing is good because friends always say that it's good. But my teacher say that I have to have a lot of writing because it's not so good and at the first time I feel confident of my writing because I think that my grammar- my tense and my plural and verb use with plural, with singular is OK. But when the feedback come out, teacher doesn't look enough in that grammar. The grammar is not the most important thing for her, so she check in the coherence, in introduction, in something else. And I haven't got good marks so I think that I am poor in everything of writing. [... ] I think that my grammar is good but I didn't get any comments that 'oh your grammar is good, but you still have to, you still have to correct about something like this' But all the comments come that my writing is not so good, so I feel that everything is poor. [... ] I think that at least she should admire me some points. [... ] From that time I discouraged a lot and I feel don't like writing."


(F. Hyland, 1998, pp. 277-278)

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(F. Hyland, 1998, pp. 277-278)



**Teacher's correct errors relationally,  
guided by what they know about identity,  
agency, and affect for each of their  
students as a whole and at the moment of  
correction!**



**Most of the EC research does not factor any of this complexity in... Only external behaviors and language products/tests are considered.**

**Research** → Inconclusive  
answers, doubtful relevance  
if complexity is not tackled

**Critical mistrust!** Teachers must put  
aside the EC research, however  
interesting, as relevance is not  
demonstrated yet...

**...some modest usefulness**

**may remain: Rankin & Becker (2006):**

**in their case study of a German FL**

**teaching assistant, reading error correction**

**research** “prompted a deeper level of

analysis regarding [his own] feedback

behaviors, partly by providing the words to

describe them” **(p. 365)**



**But in general, I recommend a healthy dose critical mistrust!**

**... Error correction must be taken as a rich journey of professional self-discovery for teachers...**

# 5. In conclusion



# What do these three cases show?

**Teachers and researchers must negotiate their relation from a position of difference-in-equality and reciprocity**

**Teachers will find research to have no fixed value for them, researchers will find no guaranteed goodness for teaching in their research**

**“Relevance” is hard fought and hard won, from teaching to research and back!**

**Do we want to promote researchers' generation of useful SLA knowledge, and teachers' useful engagement with it?**

**Yes...**

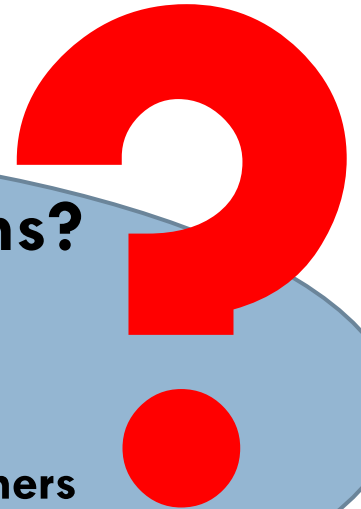
**Application, technical solutions?**

**e.g.,**

**Tools for doing/reading research for teachers**

**Translation/dissemination strategies**

**for researchers**



Instead, **teachers** can think of a **critical relevance check**:



**Q: Does it amplify, augment, invigorate what I already know? Does it resonate with my practice?**

**A: Yes, then apply as I see fit!**

**Q: Does it open new understandings and options where I was at a loss of ideas, powerless?**

**A: Yes, then apply as I see fit!**

**Q: Does the relevance leave me unconvinced?**

**A: Yes????... then withhold application!**

And **researchers** can consider ways to **strive for educational relevance when generating L2 research** (Belcher, 2007, p. 399):

“conceiving of research problems as nested in a number of research and real world contexts”

**Contextualize**

“considering pedagogy early in one’s research plans (long before the implications are written up)”

**Make relevant by design**

“contemplating the needs of an audience that includes those eager to make the most of our field’s partial knowledge on Monday morning”

**Respect teachers as research audience and users**

## Research can have relevance for teaching

When it produces insights in synergy with teacher knowledge

When the relation between researchers and teachers is truly negotiated in reciprocity

When it empowers teachers in areas where their efficacy is low

***Instead of SLA  
researchers and  
language teachers  
struggling over  
“application”...***



**The search for teaching  
relevance in research,  
aided by critical agency  
and reciprocity, is  
worthwhile**



# Thank You

[lortega@hawaii.edu](mailto:lortega@hawaii.edu)



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