

Tackling Misleading Assumptions and Beliefs in Language Development and Language Instruction: A Way Forward in Language Teacher Education

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Abstract

The nature of language, its representation in the mind of humans, and how it is processed and eventually acquired should constitute the basic knowledge in the development of an effective and evidence-based language teacher-education programme. The lack of language experts currently teaching in these programmes has often led to the perpetuation of misleading beliefs and wrong assumptions about language development and language instruction. For example, the old belief that language is a list of rules, such as those found in textbooks, and that ‘knowing a language involves knowing its rules’ has led to the misleading view that teaching grammar explicitly is necessary or even beneficial for language development. The main consequence of perpetuating misleading beliefs is one hand the development of ineffective language teacher education programmes which are not evidence-based, and on the other hand the development of misleading assumptions for language instruction. Language teacher education programmes are often about training language instructors to use textbooks and perpetuating the use of traditional language teaching methodologies. In this paper, the mismatch between misleading beliefs, assumptions and facts based on scientific evidence in language development are highlighted with the view of providing an effective way forward in the development of appropriate language teacher education programmes.

Keywords

Evidence-based practice, language teacher education, misconceptions, grammar instruction, language processing and development

Assumptions, beliefs or facts?

Over the past three decades, my experience as a language instructor and researcher in second language development has revealed a persistent mismatch between what is known about language acquisition and how languages are typically taught in formal educational settings. Although many curricula worldwide claim to adopt a “communicative” orientation, classroom practices often remain insufficiently interactive, cognitively grounded, and informed by empirical evidence. Effective language instruction should prioritise authentic, meaning-focused communication that equips L2 learners to use the target language beyond the classroom (Long, 2015).

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A central issue underlying this mismatch is the limited understanding many instructors have of what constitutes a language task, particularly the distinction between a task and a traditional exercise (Shehadeh, 2024). A genuine language task is goal-oriented and requires L2 learners to interpret, negotiate, and express meaning within a specific context to achieve a clear outcome. Tasks therefore involve communicative uses of language rather than the manipulation of isolated forms (Long, 2005). Empirical research has consistently shown that task-based activities facilitate language acquisition by exposing L2 learners to rich, comprehensible input and by engaging them in communicative behaviour resembling real-world language use (Bryfonski & McKay, 2017).

Comparative studies further support this position. For example, Ferzaneh and Benati (2021) demonstrated that communicative tasks are more effective than traditional question–answer practice in promoting English language development. Meaningful interaction and negotiation of meaning occurred only when L2 learners were engaged in interactive, purpose-driven tasks. Such findings reinforce the view that language acquisition is fostered when L2 learners are given genuine opportunities to interpret and express meaning in context (Leeser & White, 2015).

A language exercise is an activity that focuses predominantly on language mechanics, practising a specific linguistic feature, using language out of context, and having no tangible effects on language acquisition. The belief is that language consists of a collection of explainable rules, and these rules can be practiced and internalized. This misleading belief that language is a list of rules, such as those found in textbooks, and that ‘knowing a language involves knowing its rules’, has led to several assumptions: the assumption that grammatical rules should be presented through long and elaborated explanations; (ii) the assumption that mechanical grammar drill practice should be utilised to practise and acquire grammatical rules; (iii) and the assumption that L2 learners are communicating if they’re asking and answering questions. The perpetuation of these assumptions has led to the use of teaching practices that do not engage L2 learners in real communication (Benati, 2020; Lee, 2000; Long, 2015), and where grammatical rules are explained and then practised by applying these rules adopting mechanical exercises and Q/A type of practice. In this scenario, the main assumption is that the building blocks of language are rules and communication is equated to simply speaking in the target language.

A fact is that language is not simply a list of rules which needs to be explicitly internalized by L2 learners, but an implicit mental complex and abstract system. A fact is that language development involves the formation and strengthening of word-meaning connections in the input during comprehension (VanPatten, Smith & Benati, 2025), and the strengthening of these links through language use (comprehension and production). The implication of these facts about language and language development translate into language instruction by ensuring language L2 learners have the opportunity to interpret and express meaning via comprehensible and meaningful input and, and to make appropriate word-meaning connections.

Language is not merely a collection of words or rules for communication; it is an implicit mental framework through which humans organize thought, interpret experience, and construct meaning. This abstract cognitive system develops gradually as individuals form connections between words, concepts, emotions, and experiences. Over time, these connections become stronger and more complex, allowing the mind to process information with increasing depth,

precision, and flexibility. The development of language relies heavily on the brain's ability to create and reinforce word-meaning relationships. Each interaction, conversation, reading experience, or sensory encounter contributes to a growing network of associations. As these networks expand, language evolves from simple labelling into a sophisticated system capable of supporting reasoning, imagination, memory, problem-solving, and social understanding. In this way, language development is not only about acquiring vocabulary or grammar; it is fundamentally about building interconnected structures of meaning. The stronger and more integrated these connections become, the more effectively individuals can think, learn, communicate, and engage with the world around them.

A word-meaning connection is made by language L2 Learners when data is processed during comprehension. Therefore, for example, a word such as -dog- must be tagged as meaning = an animal/pet with four legs, for it to be acquired. Likewise, a form must be linked to meaning during comprehension such as the case of the English regular past tense marker-ed which need to be tagged as meaning <+past> <-present> for it to be acquired. Traditional grammar practices do not allow L2 learners to make appropriate word or form-meaning connections. The misgiving belief that acquiring grammar can be simply a matter of learning its rules and practising those rules through mechanical practice or Q/A practice is not supported by scientific evidence (Benati, 2024).

Language development is most effective when L2 learners are actively engaged in interpreting and expressing meaning through authentic communication and meaningful interaction. Providing opportunities for L2 learners to listen, speak, read, and write in purposeful contexts helps them develop language as a tool for thinking and understanding, rather than simply memorizing isolated rules or vocabulary. Through discussion, storytelling, questioning, collaboration, and reflection, L2 learners strengthen their ability to construct and communicate meaning in diverse situations. Equally important is providing opportunities for L2 learners to make strong word-meaning connections. Language develops when L2 learners repeatedly encounter words in meaningful contexts and connect them to ideas, experiences, emotions, actions, and prior knowledge. These connections deepen comprehension and support long-term retention. Activities such as contextual reading, conversation, visual supports, hands-on experiences, and semantic mapping help L2 learners build richer and more flexible understandings of language. Together, opportunities for meaningful expression and intentional word-meaning connections support the development of language as an interconnected cognitive system. As L2 learners engage with language in authentic and meaningful ways, they strengthen the mental networks that support communication, comprehension, critical thinking, and learning across all areas.

Language instruction should be driven and informed by facts and not beliefs or assumptions about how language L2 learners might acquire a second language. Language teacher education programmes should be developed by ensuring that principles and evidence from theory and research in language development can be applied to day-to-day language instructional efforts.

Measurable facts in language development

Developing a basic knowledge about the main ingredients responsible for how languages are acquired does equip language instructors with the necessary tools to make effective and informative instructional choices. Two key questions in language development theory and research have provided measurable facts which are relevant for language instruction:

- What components and processes are involved in language development?
- How does language develop on the learner's mind over time?

What components and processes are involved in language development?

To understand the components and processes underlying language development, it is first necessary to define what language is. From a linguistic perspective, language can be described as an internal and abstract mental system composed of formal properties such as sounds, words, and thematic roles, which humans rely on to comprehend and convey meaning (VanPatten & Simonsen, 2022). Humans are biologically equipped with specialized cognitive mechanisms that support language acquisition, and these mechanisms depend heavily on exposure to language input.

Input refers to the language L2 learners are exposed to through listening or reading that is intended to communicate meaning. For input to contribute to language development, it must be both meaningful and understandable. However, not all input encountered by L2 learners is fully processed or retained. Learners rely on comprehension strategies—often referred to as input processing strategies—to manage and interpret the language they encounter. These strategies help L2 learners establish connections between linguistic forms and their meanings, such as associating a word with its real-world referent, and identifying thematic roles within a sentence, including who is performing an action and who is affected by it.

Language development is therefore driven by the interaction between input and cognitive processing. For acquisition to occur, linguistic information must be internalized through form–meaning connections (VanPatten & Williams, 2015; VanPatten & Benati, 2015). During language processing, multiple mental operations occur simultaneously. L2 learners prioritize meaning by focusing on key lexical items such as nouns and verbs, while also attending to phonological information and word order. Only input that is comprehensible and meaningful can be effectively processed, as abstract rule explanations alone do not directly contribute to acquisition.

As L2 learners process meaningful input, it interacts with their existing linguistic knowledge, gradually strengthening and expanding their internal language system. Over time, this evolving mental representation allows L2 learners to move from basic comprehension to the production of increasingly complex language forms (VanPatten, Smith, & Benati, 2025).

Two measurable facts from this first question are:

- Language is not a list of rules or a skill like any other skills. Instead, it is a complex, abstract and implicit system which develops as language L2 learners attempt to make word-meaning connections.
- Meaningful and comprehensible input is the basic data for effective language development.

How does language develop on the learner's mind over time?

L2 gradually build an internal linguistic system that is organised and systematic. Language development occurs as L2 learners incorporate linguistic input, such as words, into this system by forming structured links between form and meaning. Regular exposure to input that is both meaningful and comprehensible supports the creation of these connections and helps reinforce the developing language system over time.

Implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge differ in fundamental ways. Explicit knowledge involves conscious awareness and deliberate understanding of language rules. For instance, L2 learners may consciously know that an -s is added to a verb to mark the third person singular in the present tense in English. In contrast, implicit knowledge operates unconsciously and without intention. According to VanPatten and Smith (2022), there are no direct mechanisms that allow explicit knowledge to be converted into implicit knowledge.

Two measurable facts from this second question are:

- Language develops as connections between word/form and meaning are made and strengthened into the system.
- Implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge are qualitatively different and there is no interface between the two systems.

Innovative language instruction is based on facts

Based on empirical findings in second language acquisition research, several important implications for language instruction can be identified (Benati, 2020).

First, given how languages are acquired, explicit language teaching should not be the primary instructional approach. Rather than providing direct explanations or overt error correction, instructors should emphasize input-based and meaning-focused instruction. Feedback should be implicit and indirect, allowing L2 learners to notice form through exposure rather than memorization. Mechanical drills and rote learning of vocabulary or grammar rules should be minimized. Instead, lexical items should be introduced within purposeful and meaningful contexts so that L2 learners can establish accurate connections between form and meaning (VanPatten, 2017).

Second, meaningful input plays a central role in language acquisition. Language instructors should consistently supply learners with comprehensible input that is appropriate to their proficiency level, along with opportunities for meaningful interaction. The target language should be used as much as possible in the classroom. Input should be simplified and modified to support processing, using both linguistic strategies (clear and simple language) and non-linguistic supports such as visuals, images, gestures, and drawings. L2 learners should be guided to attend to new forms in the input and develop precise form–meaning relationships.

Finally, the foundation of a language curriculum should consist of communicative and interactive tasks rather than mechanical exercises. Communication should not be reduced to question-and-answer patterns or unstructured discussion. Instead, it involves the interpretation, negotiation, and production of language for meaningful purposes within real-world contexts (van Ruler, 2018). To support this approach, instructors should be provided with clear principles for designing effective communicative tasks (Long, 2015).

Overall, classroom instruction should prioritize rich input, comprehension, and meaningful communication to support effective language development (Benati, 2020, 2024).

Language teacher education: A way forward

Language instructors, as well as curriculum and materials designers, need to shift away from instructional practices based on assumptions and beliefs and adopt approaches grounded in empirical evidence. What is already known about how language functions and how it develops in the learner's mind must be meaningfully integrated into innovative classroom practices. According to Benati (2024), effective language teacher education rests on two fundamental foundations: first, a well-developed understanding of theoretical and research-based insights into the nature of language and language acquisition; and second, a clear understanding of how communication operates and why it matters in language learning. Together, these foundations support the design of effective and forward-looking language instruction. When educators lack a solid understanding of language, its development, and the role of communication, teaching is often driven by inaccurate beliefs—for example, the notion that language consists merely of a set of rules that can be mastered through repetitive mechanical practice.

A module on language and language development

Language teacher education programmes should include a dedicated module on language and language development. Such a module is essential to ensure that future language instructors gain a solid understanding of how insights from linguistic theory and empirical research can inform everyday classroom practice. Understanding what language is and how it develops in the minds of L2 learners is a fundamental component of effective teacher education.

When instructors lack this knowledge, it often results in the continuation of inaccurate assumptions and outdated beliefs about language learning.

One common misconception is the belief that language consists of a fixed set of rules, typically presented in textbooks, and that mastering these rules equates to learning a language. This misunderstanding also contributes to the continued use of traditional, form-focused approaches to language instruction. Viewing language as nothing more than the rules and explanations found in instructional materials has led many educators to assume that explicit grammar teaching is essential for language development. However, empirical research has challenged this assumption. Studies investigating the effects of explicit grammar instruction (Benati, 2021) have shown that such instruction does not facilitate the development of the internal language system. Language is a complex, abstract, and largely implicit system that exists in the learner's mind. Explicit and metalinguistic knowledge are not part of this mental representation, nor does explicit knowledge become implicit through repeated practice. Instead, language development is driven by exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input, in interaction with universal linguistic principles inherent in the human mind.

A module on communication

Language teacher education programmes should include a dedicated module on communication in order to develop a clear understanding of its nature, role, and defining characteristics. Many language instructors lack a precise conceptualisation of communication and often reduce it to spoken language alone. This oversimplified view has resulted in teaching practices that equate communication with activities such as question-and-answer routines or open-ended speaking prompts. As a result, many language textbooks focus on tasks that merely require L2 learners to talk about a topic (e.g., describing a family member or recounting a holiday) without necessarily engaging in meaningful communication.

Effective language use through pedagogical tasks requires L2 learners to comprehend, negotiate, manipulate, and produce the target language within a meaningful context and for a specific communicative goal. A module on communication would help clarify the distinction between language and communication. Language refers to an abstract, complex, and implicit mental system composed of multiple interacting components that allow speakers to generate even simple sentences. Communication, by contrast, is a social behaviour that occurs between individuals or communities and is shaped by context, participants, and purpose. L2 learners engage in genuine communication when they are given opportunities to interpret meaning, negotiate understanding, and express themselves to achieve specific outcomes in particular settings (Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

Such a module should also explicitly address the distinction between language and communication (VanPatten, 2017). Communication involves using language to convey meaning while interacting with others in context. However, language itself develops and exists in the mind independently of actual communicative use. Understanding this distinction is essential for language instructors when designing instructional activities that promote both language development and communicative ability.

What is the role of textbooks in language teacher education?

Language curricula should be continuously reviewed and updated by experts in language acquisition. Language instructors need a foundational understanding of how languages are learned in order to make informed instructional decisions (Keating, 2018). Currently, there is a growing gap between research findings, theoretical advances, and classroom practice. Insights from second language acquisition research have not yet been fully integrated into mainstream teaching practices. Addressing this gap requires helping instructors distinguish between assumptions, personal beliefs, and empirically supported facts about language learning and development.

Reducing reliance on traditional practices embedded in inadequate textbooks could lead to significant improvements in language instruction. Such a shift would encourage instructors to adopt approaches that more effectively promote language development (Jordan & Long, 2022). At present, many instructors depend heavily on textbooks, and teacher education programmes often focus on training language instructors to use these materials rather than critically evaluating them. This textbook-driven approach limits opportunities for authentic communication and reduces the potential for creating interactive, engaging, and communicatively rich classroom environments.

What is the role of language tests in language teacher education?

Research on language development and instruction supports the use of communicative and interactive approaches to teaching. However, language courses are typically embedded within institutional systems that prioritise numerical assessment outcomes. Consequently, language ability is often evaluated through traditional paper-and-pencil tests that primarily measure explicit knowledge, such as gap-filling exercises or written responses.

This raises an important question: how can language assessment more accurately reflect L2 learners' communicative competence? One possible solution is the use of "can-do statements." These self-assessment tools allow L2 learners to evaluate what they can actually

do with the language rather than what they know about it. For example, L2 learners may assess whether they can participate in meaningful conversations on familiar topics or manage everyday social interactions. Can-do statements provide a practical and performance-based method for evaluating language ability and can serve as an effective assessment measure within language programmes.

How can technology be integrated in language teacher education?

Language technology has the potential to significantly enhance language development by increasing exposure to comprehensible input and creating opportunities for authentic communication. The key challenge lies in determining how technology can be used effectively to support meaningful language learning rather than functioning as an isolated add-on.

Technology should serve as a tool that complements well-established instructional frameworks such as task-based language teaching (Long, 2015) and communicative language teaching. When integrated thoughtfully, technology can provide L2 learners with access to high-quality, abundant, and meaningful input through audio, visual, and social media, as well as through games and interactive software. Digital materials offer the advantage of combining visual and verbal input, thereby enhancing comprehension and highlighting linguistic features.

Furthermore, technology can extend communication beyond the classroom. Computer-mediated communication tools allow L2 learners to interact with authentic communities through social networking platforms and multimedia environments. These tools can support the creation of task-based learning contexts that are interactive, motivating, contextualised, and authentic.

Artificial intelligence-driven platforms also should offer new possibilities for language instruction by combining instructional support with data-informed activity design. Such technologies can assist instructors in developing evidence-based activities that foster reading, listening, speaking, writing, and grammatical competence, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of language teacher education. The sheer adaptability and scale of AI have created a new era for educational material development across subjects. Yet the central risk—and temptation—of AI in education is its ability to short-circuit the thinking process itself, subtly framing how knowledge is structured, interpreted, and delivered. For this reason, it is crucial that the design of any pedagogical AI tool positions the teacher as the architect of the materials they develop. The system should function only as an engine—supporting, accelerating, and structuring the process—while the teacher retains authorship over the pedagogical design. As our ability to map pedagogical principles into large language models improves, and as we deepen our understanding of how teachers interact with these systems, the likelihood increases that the traditional textbook will gradually become obsolete (Benati & Benati, forthcoming). This aligns with the broader “paradigm shift” observed in global English language teaching, where conventional, textbook-driven EFL models are increasingly questioned and forced to adapt to new global realities (Copeland et al., 2025).

What is the role of classroom instruction-based research in language teacher education?

Language teacher education programmes should be informed by the findings of classroom instruction-based research. Instructed second language acquisition is a branch of research

investigating the role of instruction in language development (Benati, 2025). This type of research is essential as it provides important insights for language pedagogy. However, it is paramount that classroom instruction-based research, in measuring whether formal instruction facilitates and influences language development, considers the following (VanPatten, 2025):

- The role and nature of language and language development;
- The qualitative difference between explicit and implicit knowledge;
- The of the instructional treatment and what is it trying to affect;
- The immediate and durative effects of language instruction.

What is the role of the target language in language teacher education?

Language teacher education programmes should offer explicit guidance on the effective use of the target language during classroom interaction. A well-established principle in second language development is that L2 learners acquire a new language primarily through exposure to input that is both meaningful and comprehensible, in much the same way that first languages are acquired (Gass & Mackey, 2015). Input refers to the language L2 learners hear or read that conveys meaning and requires interpretation. For input to support language development, it must communicate a message and be understandable to the learner.

Language acquisition involves the gradual formation of connections between linguistic forms and their meanings. Linguistic features such as vocabulary and grammatical structures become part of a learner's developing language system only when they are meaningfully interpreted and understood (VanPatten, 2015). For instance, the word *house* is learned not merely as a sound or written form, but as a concept referring to a place where people live. In classroom settings, the input provided to L2 L2 should therefore be adjusted and supported through contextual cues and extra-linguistic aids to ensure comprehension and effective processing.

A common concern among language instructors is how to use the target language with learners who have little or no prior knowledge of it. Language instructors must naturally adjust and simplify their language to make communication possible. Teacher education programmes should highlight key instructional strategies that facilitate comprehension: using short and structurally simple sentences to reduce cognitive load; speaking at a slower pace and emphasizing key lexical items; rephrasing utterances to support interaction and negotiation of meaning; and ensuring that lesson content is clearly organized and accessible. These adjustments make linguistic input more processable and help L2 learners establish form–meaning relationships, which are essential for language development.

Although it is true that L2 learners at early stages may struggle to understand large amounts of spoken target language, instructors can enhance comprehension through non-verbal and visual support such as gestures, drawings, photographs, diagrams, and other visual aids. Additionally, selecting familiar topics can activate L2 learners' background knowledge, making it easier for them to interpret new language. When L2 learners can relate content to known experiences, language processing becomes more efficient.

Maximizing the use of the target language in the classroom is crucial. Instructors should encourage its use consistently, including for classroom management and routine interaction. Providing L2 learners with rich and meaningful exposure to the target language facilitates acquisition. The use of authentic language tasks, rather than mechanical exercises, further promotes meaningful communication (Shehadeh, 2024). Unlike exercises, tasks require

learners to use the target language to achieve a specific goal or outcome, thereby fostering genuine language use.

When L2 learners are reluctant to use the target language, instructors can implement a range of strategies (Benati, 2020). These include selecting tasks that match L2 learners' proficiency levels, pre-teaching necessary language forms, designing tasks where target language use is essential, and clearly explaining learning objectives so L2 learners understand the value of using the target language. Language instructors can also engage L2 learners in discussions about their reluctance to use the target language and invite them to suggest solutions. Creating a supportive learning environment through non-threatening tasks, flexible group arrangements, adequate preparation time, and interesting topics can further encourage participation.

The use of L2 learners' first language in the classroom remains a debated issue in second language instruction (Shin, Dixon, & Choi, 2019). The prevailing view supports instruction primarily through the target language, with minimal reliance on the first language. Some researchers, however, argue that the first language can serve useful cognitive, sociolinguistic, or managerial functions, particularly at early learning stages. Nevertheless, excessive use of the first language can be counterproductive, especially when it replaces meaningful interaction in the target language or overwhelms L2 learners with frequent translations and explanations. Given limited classroom time, overuse of the first language reduces L2 learners' exposure to comprehensible target language input, thereby constraining language development.

Conclusive remarks

An effective language teacher education programme should support both novice instructors and experienced practitioners in developing a clear understanding of how theory, empirical research, and classroom practice interact in language teaching. Its overarching purpose is to explore and promote a pedagogy of language instruction that is cognitively grounded, research-informed, and demonstrably effective. To achieve this goal, a comprehensive teacher education programme should be structured around at least six core modules:

1. The nature and function of language
2. Fundamental principles of second language development
3. The role of input in language learning and instruction
4. Grammar and vocabulary instruction: purposes and limitations
5. Communication, interaction, and task-based language use
6. The pedagogical role of technology in language instruction

Among these components, the first two modules are often those for which language instructors are least prepared when making instructional decisions. Limited exposure to theories of language and language development frequently results in inaccurate assumptions, such as the belief that the grammatical rules presented in textbooks are directly internalised by L2 learners, or that language acquisition primarily occurs through studying, memorisation, and repeated practice. These misconceptions are often reinforced by teacher education curricula and assessment practices, where explicit engagement with the nature of language and how it develops is largely absent.

As a result, many current approaches to language teacher education fail to equip language instructors with a solid understanding of second language development or with the ability to translate research findings into effective classroom practices. A growing divide exists between advances in language development research and the design of teacher education programmes. Although substantial empirical evidence has emerged in recent decades, much of this knowledge has not yet influenced mainstream language teaching practices. Addressing this disconnect requires helping language instructors differentiate clearly between empirically supported facts, long-held assumptions, and personal beliefs.

A productive way forward in language teacher education involves several key actions:

- Designing teacher education programmes that are explicitly grounded in research-based knowledge about language and language development;
- Integrating emerging technologies in ways that are informed by how languages are acquired in the human mind, using technology as a means to support development rather than as an end in itself;
- Shifting the focus of teacher preparation away from training instructors to follow textbooks toward fostering fact-based instructional decision-making;
- Clarifying the role of communication and interaction in language learning and demonstrating how communicative and interactive activities can be effectively implemented;
- Reconsidering language curricula and assessment practices to ensure alignment with current research on language development;
- Developing teacher education programmes that are informed by empirical research on the effects and limitations of formal language instruction.

Ongoing debates within the field reflect these tensions, with some teacher educators advocating strongly for input-based, comprehension-oriented, and fully communicative classrooms, while others argue for alternative instructional approaches (Benati, 2025).

To move the field forward, language educators, curriculum designers, and materials developers must transition from belief-driven practices to instruction grounded in empirical evidence. Achieving this shift requires ensuring that language instructors have a clear understanding of what language is, what communication entails, and how language development occurs. When these foundational concepts are insufficiently developed, outdated beliefs and instructional practices tend to persist. Closing the gap between research and practice therefore remains a central challenge in contemporary language teacher education.

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