

# Yes, but how? Promoting multilingual growth in children's language treatment

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## Disclosures

- Paid full-time employee of the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities, 2019-present
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**How can we best serve the language needs of multilingual children with language disorders?**

# Overview

## 1. Foundations

- Basic premises
- Framework for multilingual proficiency

## 2. Strategies

- Targets
- Instructional approaches
- Helpers

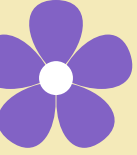
## 3. Next steps

- For practitioners
- For researchers



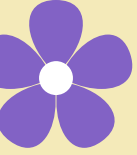
# Foundations





# **#1. Multilingualism is often a social NEED for children**

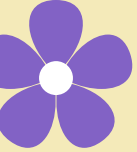
Kohnert et al., 2021; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000; Yu, 2016




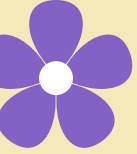
# **#2. Overall, multilingualism does not exacerbate (or ameliorate) language disorders**

Blom & Boerma, 2017; de Bree et al., 2022; Ebert, 2021; Ebert et al., 2019; Lund et al., 2017; Park et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2018; Verbeek et al., 2023



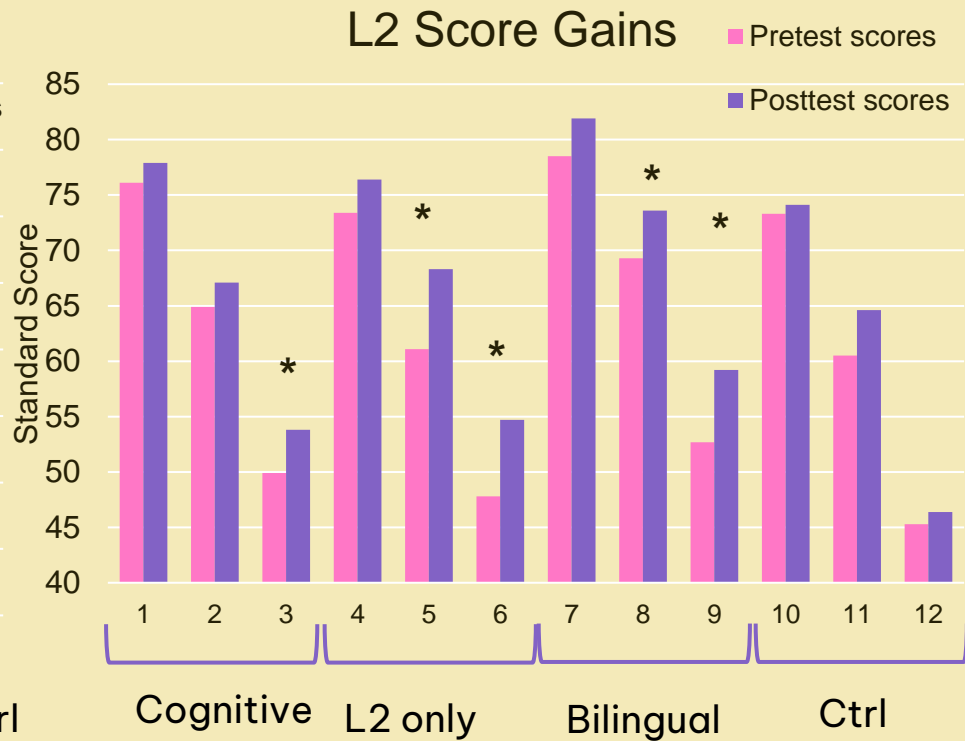
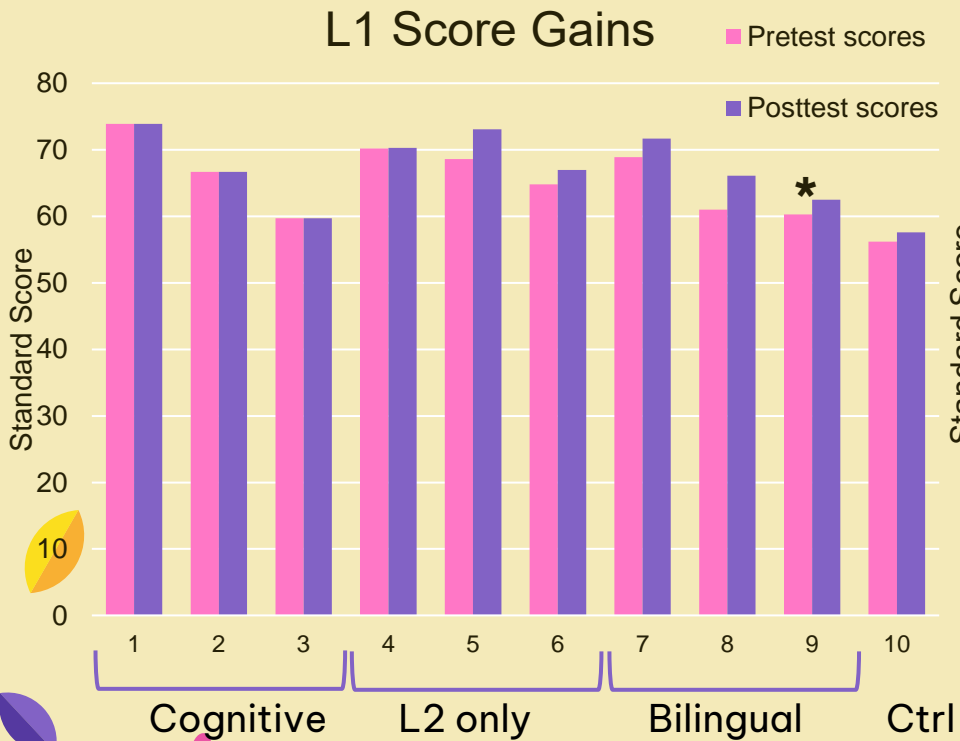



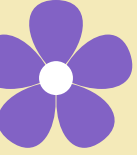
**#3. When multilingualism  
is a social need, language  
therapy should promote  
growth in all of a child's  
languages**



**#4. Providing standard,  
monolingual language therapy  
often does NOT promote  
growth in all languages**

# More specifically, minoritized, heritage languages are vulnerable to minimal growth

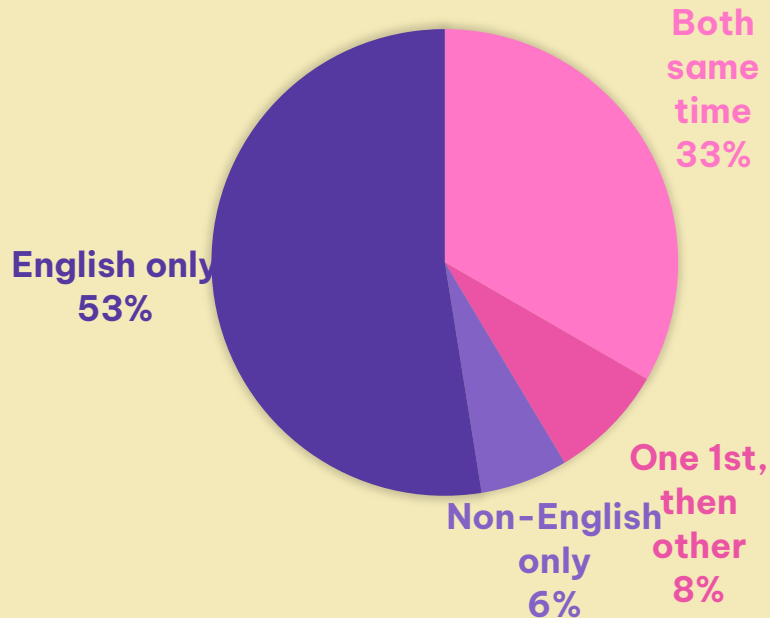




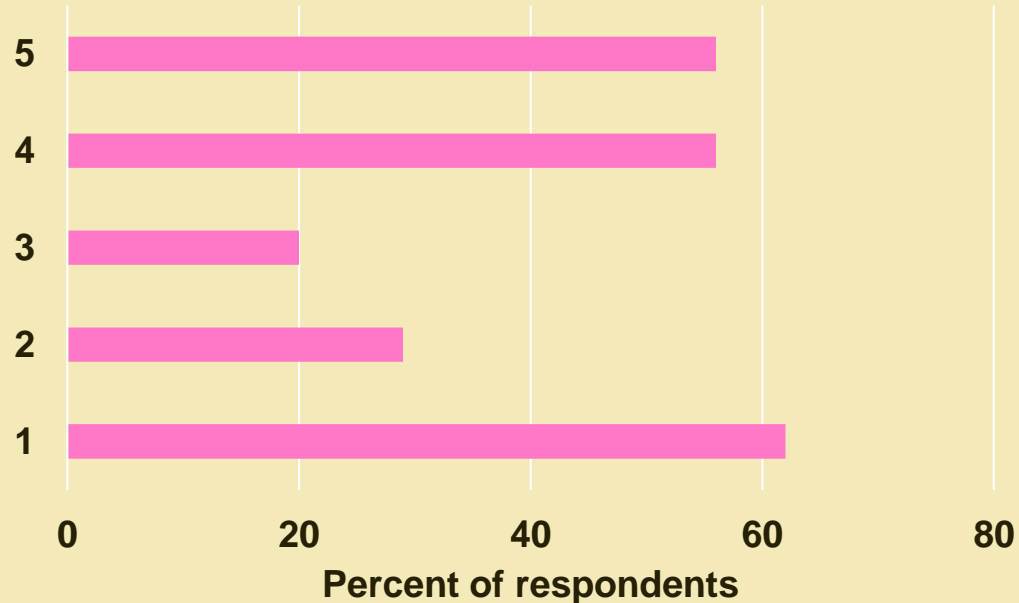
**#5. It is common that therapists do not speak all of a multilingual child's languages fluently**

# Current SLT practice with multilingual children (data from Newbury et al., 2020)

What language do you use for treatment?



Rationale for English-only treatment

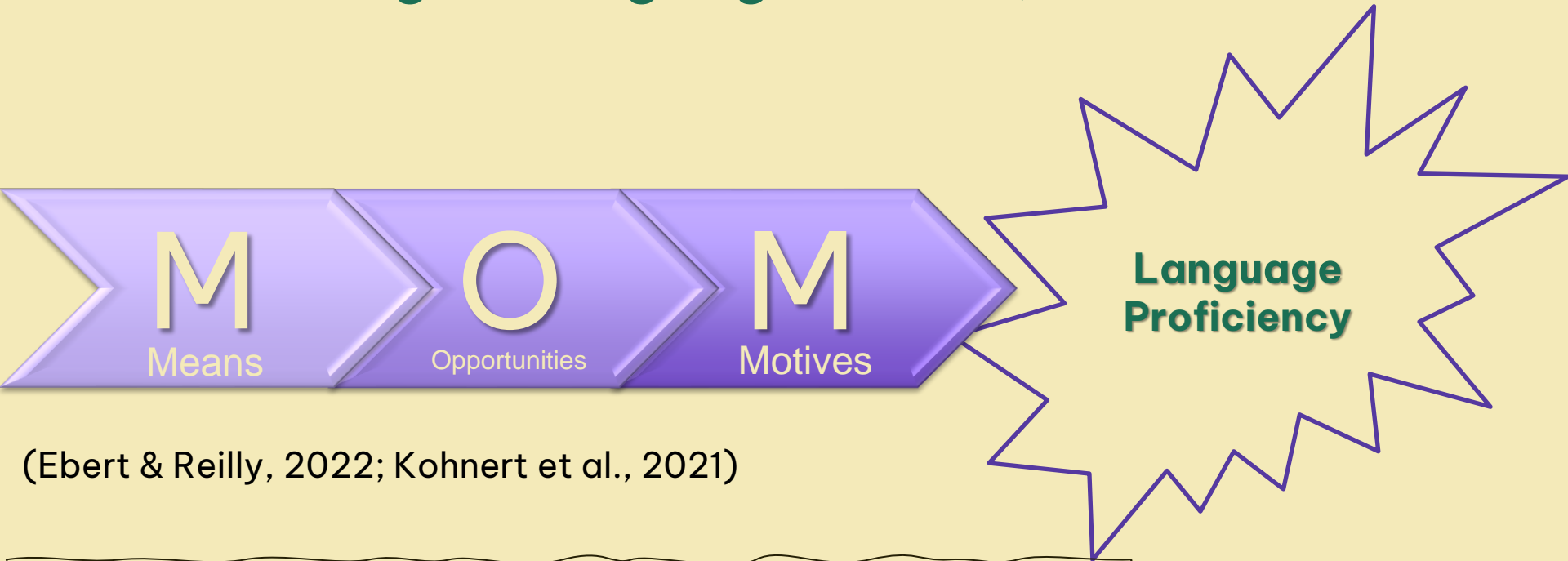


# Summing up the challenge

- Most SLTs agree we should support home & heritage languages in language treatment (e.g., Bloder et al., 2021)
- Frequently, we don't (Jordaan, 2008; Newbury et al., 2020; Williams & McLeod, 2012)
- Lack of resources, knowledge, & confidence are frequently cited barriers (Narayanan & Ramsdell, 2022; Newbury et al., 2020; Williams & McLeod, 2012)

Yes, but how?

# A framework for influences on multilingual language development



(Ebert & Reilly, 2022; Kohnert et al., 2021)

*When you work to promote language growth in language treatment, which of these areas does your therapy address?*

# A note on development



*Children's cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and linguistic skills change over time*

*Children's environmental demands and resources shift too*

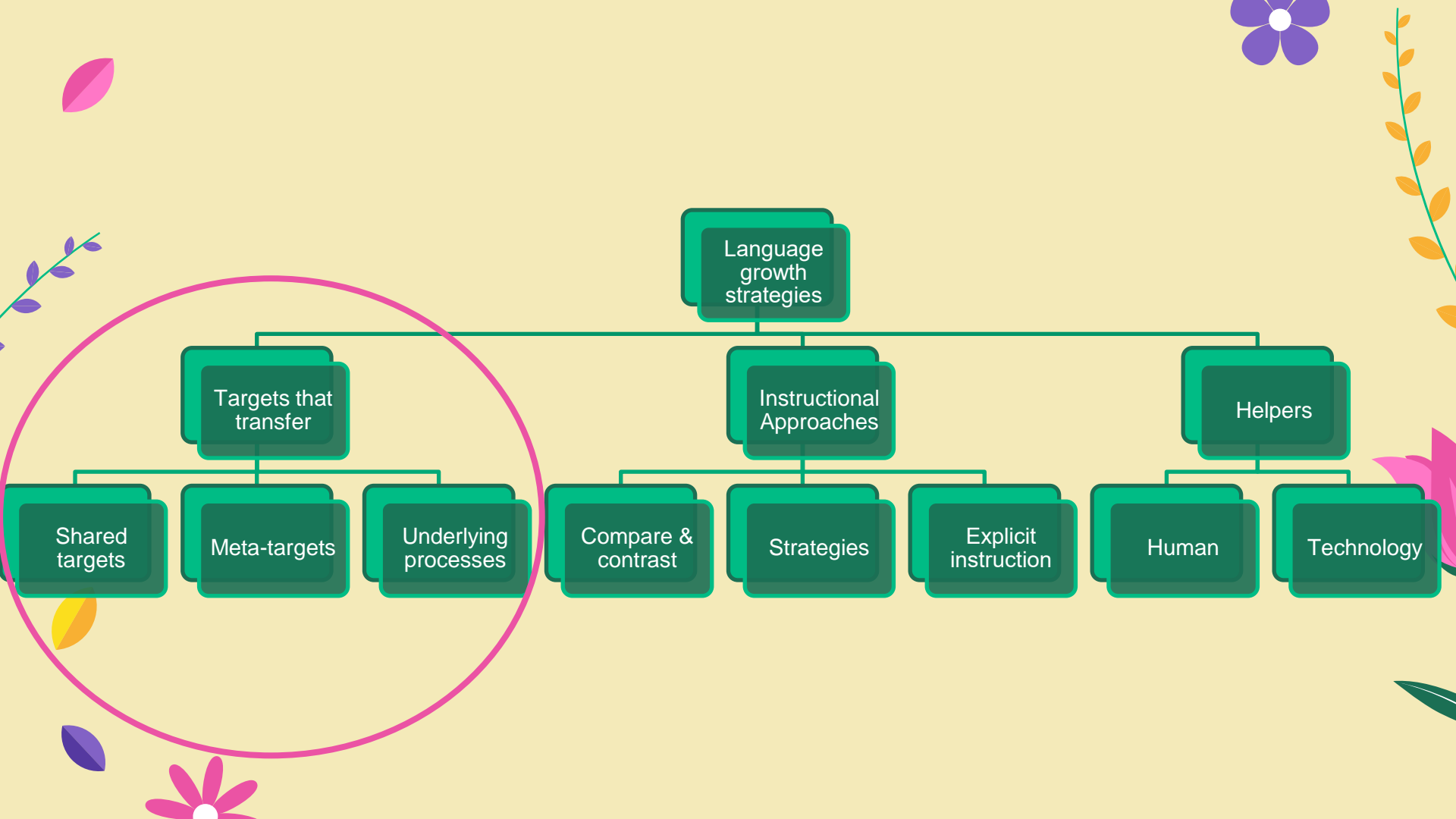


**The best treatment strategies will change across developmental stages**

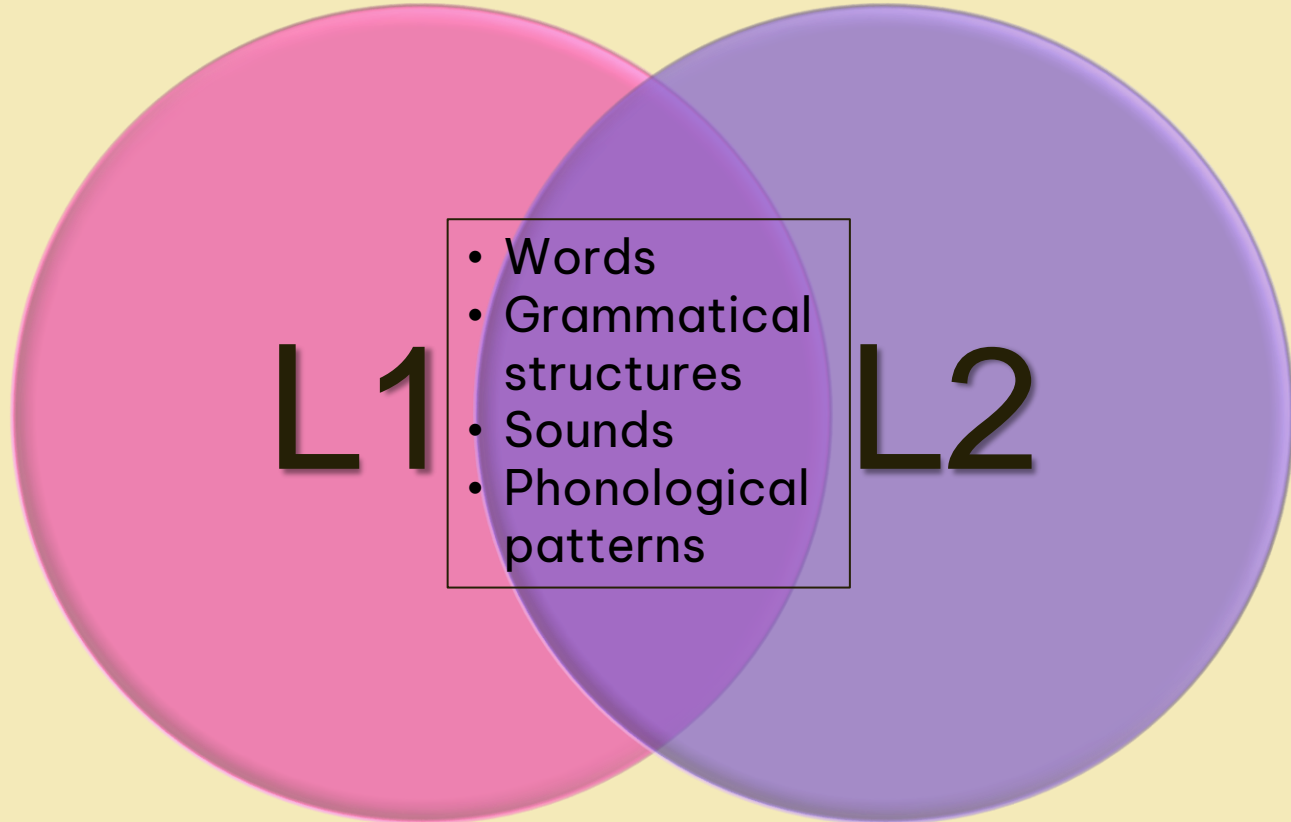


# Strategies

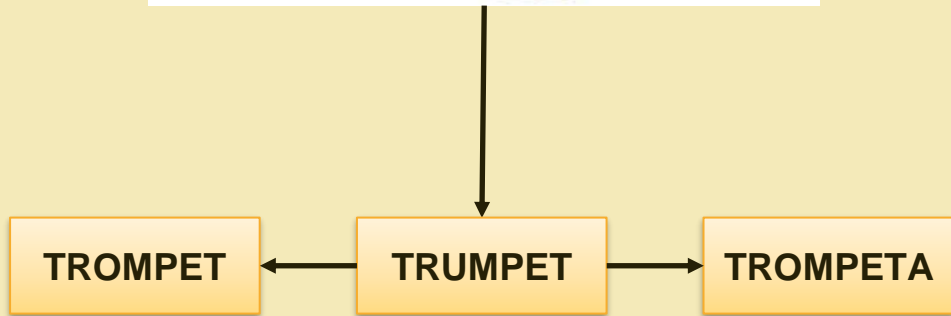




# Strategy #1: Choose shared targets



# Cognates

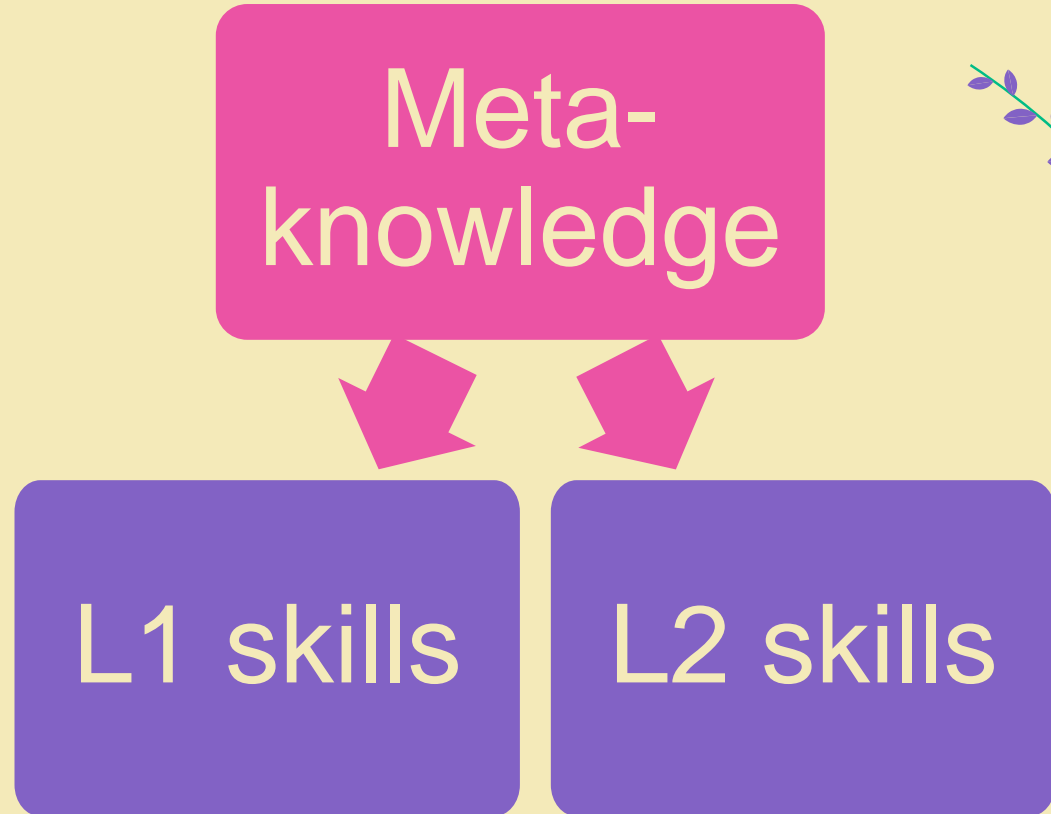


(Kambanaros et al., 2017; see also Dam et al., 2020)

- Cognate words are easier to name for bilingual children with DLD (and for typically developing children; Grasso et al., 2020; Payesteh & Pham, 2022)
- Targeting shared syntactic structures in language therapy may promote cross-linguistic transfer (Castilla-Earls & Owen Van Horne, 2022)

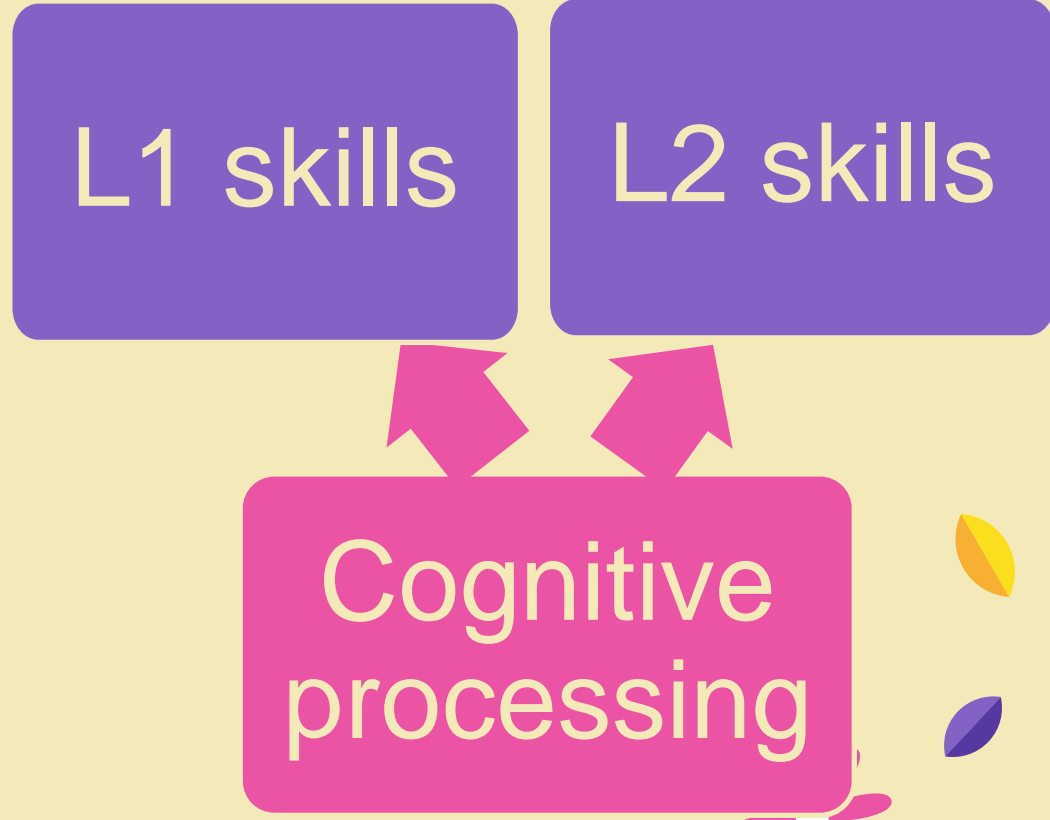
## Strategy #2: Target meta-skills

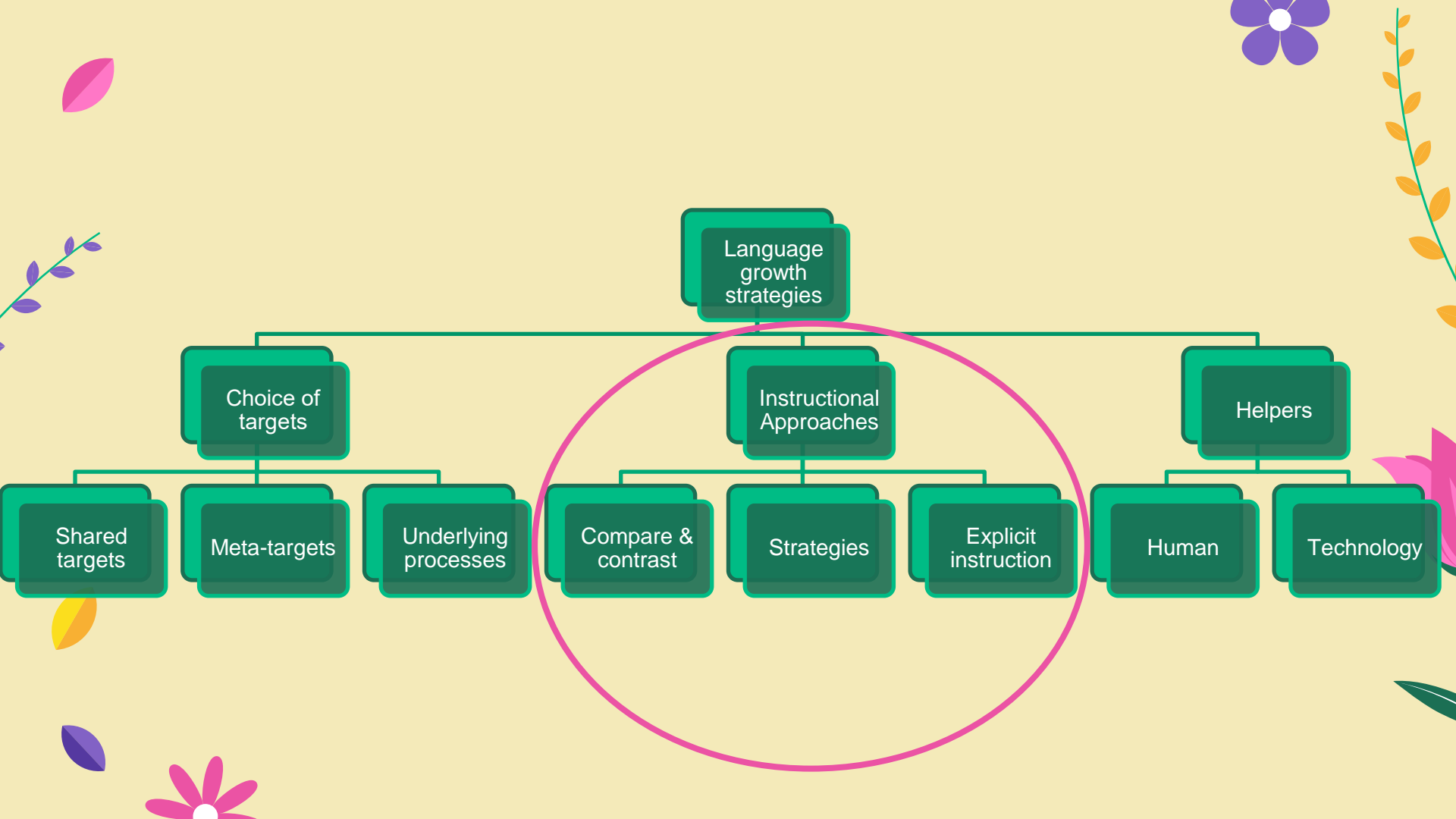
- Knowledge **about** language may transfer more easily across languages
  - Narrative structures (e.g., Boerma et al., 2016; Bonifacci et al., 2018; Squires et al., 2014)
  - Phonological awareness (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2011; Wawire & Kim, 2018)
- Some evidence for cross-linguistic transfer of macrostructural instruction\* (Petersen et al., 2016)



# Strategy #3: Target underlying cognitive skills

- Improving cognitive underpinnings of language may improve skills in both languages (Ebert et al., 2012; Ebert et al., 2014)
  - E.g., Memory, attention, processing speed; inhibition, cognitive flexibility
- Stronger cognitive skills may predict faster treatment response (Ebert & Pham, 2023)





## Strategy #4: Compare & contrast

- Identify a structure in one language
- Discuss how it is expressed similarly or differently in another
- Invokes meta-linguistic knowledge (strategy #2!) and integrates explicit instructions (strategy #6!)



He is walking  
the dog

Está paseando  
el perro



# Strategy #5: Strategies!

- Strategy-based instruction for language disorders is evidence-based in several areas
  - Reading comprehension
  - Listening comprehension
  - Word finding
- Strategies taught in one language can be applied to others

Motsch & Marks, 2016

Lexical strategies in  
German (L2)




Opportunities to practice  
at home (Turkish, L1)



Evidence of transfer to  
Turkish

# Strategy #6: Incorporate Explicit Instruction



**Model:** "She walked the dog"  
**Query Prompt:** "What did she do?"

**Grammatical Rule:** "When we talk about something that already happened, we add 't' or 'd' to the end of the action word."

**Recast:** "She walked the dog."

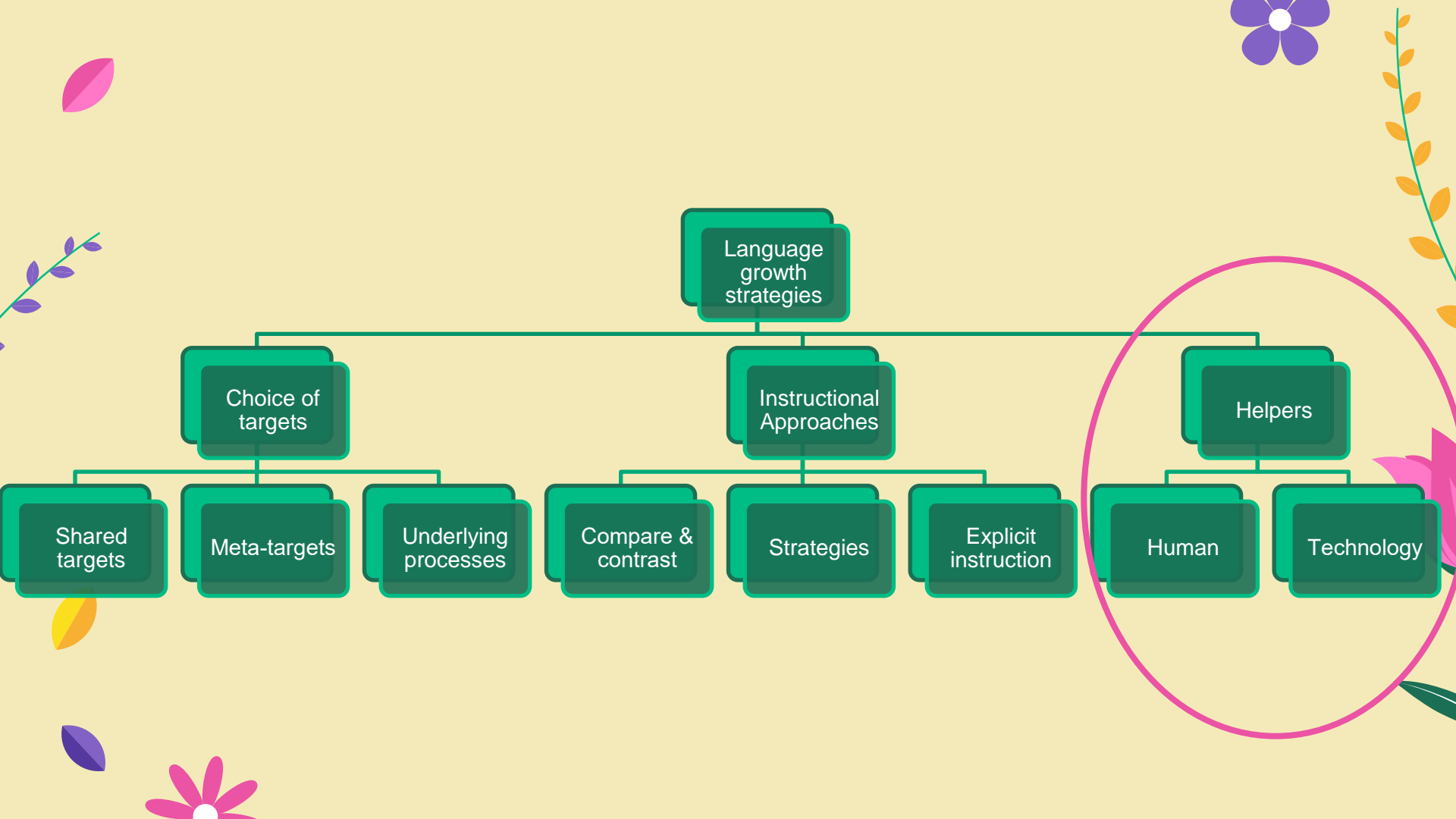
**Attempt:** "She walk the dog"

**Attempt:** "She walked the dog"

"Just like in Spanish, we use different endings on the action word when we talk about something that already happened, like "ella paseó al perro"

Bilingual children may benefit in both languages from receiving **explicit instruction** on targets & grammatical rules

(Kornelis et al., 2024; see also Baron & Arbel, 2022; Finestack, 2018)



# *Train someone who speaks the language to help with treatment*

- Who?
  - Parent, sibling, assistant, community partner
- What can they do?
  - Model
  - Provide rich input
  - Assist with compare & contrast
  - Give child feedback

## **Strategy #7: Human helpers**



## Strategy #8: Technology help

*Leverage technology to provide input & practice opportunities in languages the SLT doesn't speak*

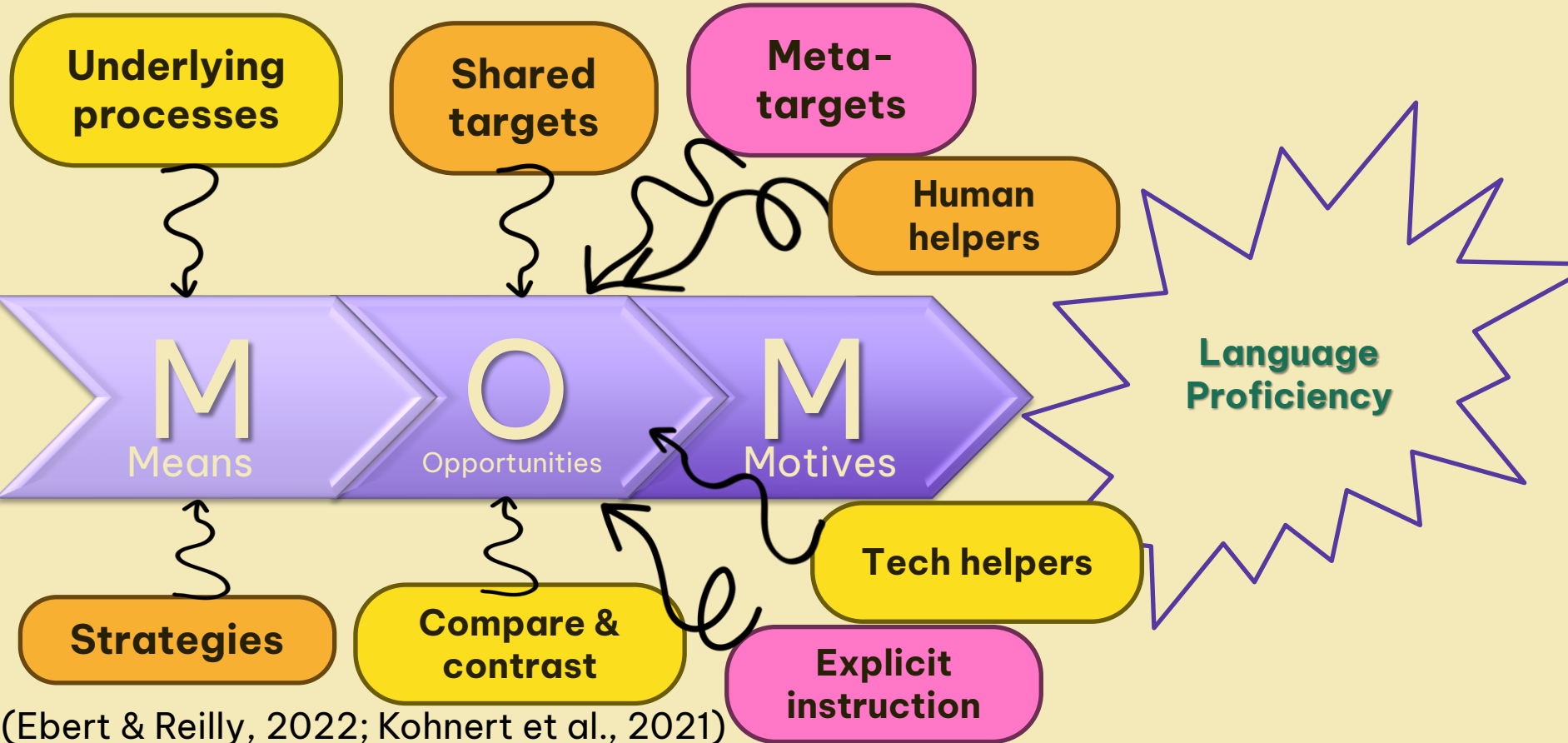
Software or Apps?

AI?

Remote therapists & helpers?



# How might our strategies promote multilingual growth?



(Ebert & Reilly, 2022; Kohnert et al., 2021)

# What about motives?



**Helpers?**

**Compare & contrast?**

**Explicit instruction?**

**Or something else?**

# How do our strategies apply across development?

Underlying processes

Human helpers



Meta-targets

Explicit instruction

Strategies

Shared targets

Tech helpers

Compare & contrast



# Next steps



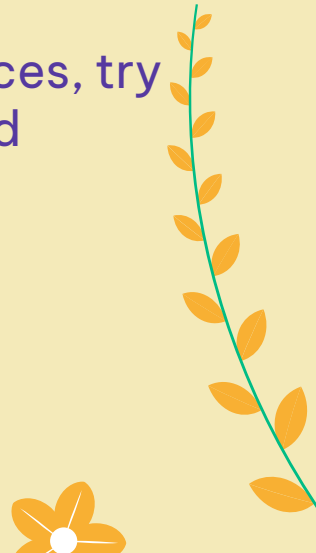
# What could work for you?

Questions to consider:

- What is the developmental level of the children you work with?
- Are there potential human helpers?
- What technology is available to you?
- What options are there for shared targets across the languages you need to address?
- Can you address *motives*?

# Addressing the challenge

- Most SLTs agree we should support home & heritage languages in language treatment
  - Frequently, we don't
  - Lack of resources, knowledge, & confidence are frequently cited barriers
- Remember the importance of ALL of a child's languages to their social and emotional well-being
  - Work to find new resources, try new strategies, and build confidence, bit by bit






## Next steps in research

Build the evidence base for our recommendations!

- How can technology be used effectively? Does explicit instruction increase learning & transfer? How close do shared targets need to be? Under what conditions can children apply strategies effectively?

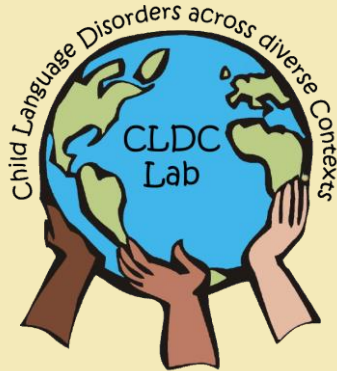
View multilingualism as a norm instead of a “messy deviation”



Measure outcomes that matter







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<https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/cldc-lab/home>

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