

BICS and CALP: Empirical and Theoretical Status of the Distinction

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Introduction

The distinction between *basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS) and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP) was introduced by Cummins (1979, 1981a) in order to draw educators' attention to the timelines and challenges that second language learners encounter as they attempt to catch up to their peers in academic aspects of the school language. BICS refers to conversational fluency in a language while CALP refers to students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school. The terms conversational fluency and academic language proficiency are used interchangeably with BICS and CALP in the remainder of this chapter.

Initially, I describe the origins, rationale, and evolution of the distinction together with its empirical foundations. I then discuss its relationship to similar theoretical constructs that have been proposed in different contexts and for different purposes. Finally, I analyze and respond to critiques of the distinction and discuss the relationship of the distinction to the emerging field of New Literacy studies (e.g. Barton, 1994; Street, 1995).

Early Developments

Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1976) initially brought attention to the fact that Finnish immigrant children in Sweden often appeared to educators to be fluent in both Finnish and Swedish but still showed levels of verbal academic performance in both languages considerably below grade/age expectations. The BICS/CALP distinction highlighted a similar reality and formalized the difference between conversational fluency and academic language proficiency as conceptually distinct components of the construct of "language proficiency". Because this was a conceptual distinction rather than an overall theory of "language proficiency" there was never any suggestion that these were the only important or relevant components of that construct.

The initial theoretical intent of the BICS/CALP distinction was to qualify Oller's (1979) claim that all individual differences in language proficiency could be accounted for by just one underlying factor, which he termed *global language proficiency*. Oller synthesized a considerable amount of data showing strong correlations between performance on cloze tests of reading, standardized reading tests, and measures of oral verbal ability (e.g. vocabulary measures). Cummins (1979), however, argued that it is problematic to incorporate all aspects of language use or performance into just one dimension of general or global language proficiency. For example, if we take two

monolingual English-speaking siblings, a 12-year old child and a six-year old, there are enormous differences in these children's ability to read and write English and in the depth and breadth of their vocabulary knowledge, but minimal differences in their phonology or basic fluency. The six-year old can understand virtually everything that is likely to be said to her in everyday social contexts and she can use language very effectively in these contexts, just as the 12-year old can. In other words, some aspects of children's first language development (e.g. phonology) reach a plateau relatively early whereas other aspects (e.g. vocabulary knowledge) continue to develop throughout our lifetimes. Thus, these very different aspects of proficiency cannot be considered to reflect just one unitary proficiency dimension.

CALP or academic language proficiency develops through social interaction from birth but becomes differentiated from BICS after the early stages of schooling to reflect primarily the language that children acquire in school and which they need to use effectively if they are to progress successfully through the grades. The notion of CALP is specific to the social context of schooling, hence the term "academic". Academic language proficiency can thus be defined as "the extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling" (Cummins, 2000, p. 67).

The relevance of the BICS/CALP distinction for bilingual students' academic development was reinforced by two research studies (Cummins, 1980, 1981b) showing that educators and policy-makers frequently conflated conversational and academic dimensions of English language proficiency and that this conflation contributed significantly to the creation of academic difficulties for students who were learning English as an additional language (EAL).

The first study (Cummins, 1980, 1984) involved an analysis of more than 400 teacher referral forms and psychological assessments carried out on EAL students in a large Canadian school system. The teacher referral forms and psychological assessment reports showed that teachers and psychologists often assumed that children had overcome all difficulties with English when they could converse easily in the language. Yet these children frequently performed poorly on English academic tasks within the classroom (hence the referral for assessment) as well as on the verbal scales of the cognitive ability test administered as part of the psychological assessment. Many students were designated as having language or communication disabilities despite the fact that they had been in Canada for a relatively short amount of time (e.g. 1-3 years). Thus, the conflation of second language (L2) conversational fluency with L2 academic proficiency contributed directly to the inappropriate placement of bilingual students in special education programs.

The need to distinguish between conversational fluency and academic aspects of L2 performance was further highlighted by the reanalysis of language performance data from the Toronto Board of Education (Cummins, 1981b). These data showed that there was a gap of several years, on average, between the attainment of peer-appropriate fluency in English and the attainment of grade norms in academic aspects of English. Conversational aspects of proficiency reached peer-appropriate levels usually within about two years of exposure to English but a period of 5-7 years was required, on

average, for immigrant students to approach grade norms in academic aspects of English (e.g. vocabulary knowledge).

The differential time periods required to attain peer-appropriate L2 conversational fluency as compared to meeting grade expectations in academic language proficiency have been corroborated in many research studies carried out during the past 30 years in Canada (Klesmer, 1994), Europe (Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978), Israel (Shohamy, Levine, Spolsky, Kere-Levy, Inbar, Shemesh, 2002), and the United States (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2002; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

The following example from the psychological assessment study (Cummins, 1980, 1984) illustrates how these implicit assumptions about the nature of language proficiency can directly affect the academic trajectories and life chances of bilingual students:

PR (289). PR was referred in first grade by the school principal who noted that “PR is experiencing considerable difficulty with grade one work. An intellectual assessment would help her teacher to set realistic learning expectations for her and might provide some clues as to remedial assistance that might be offered.”

No mention was made of the fact that the child was learning English as a second language; this only emerged when the child was referred by the second grade teacher in the following year. Thus, the psychologist does not consider this as a possible factor in accounting for the discrepancy between a verbal IQ of 64 and a performance (non-verbal) IQ of 108. The assessment report read as follows:

Although overall ability level appears to be within the low average range, note the significant difference between verbal and nonverbal scores....It would appear that PR’s development has not progressed at a normal rate and consequently she is, and will continue to experience much difficulty in school. Teacher’s expectations at this time should be set accordingly.

What is interesting in this example is that the child’s English communicative skills are presumably sufficiently well developed that the psychologist (and possibly the teacher) is not alerted to the child’s EAL background. This leads the psychologist to infer from her low verbal IQ score that “her development has not progressed at a normal rate” and to advise the teacher to set low academic expectations for the child since she “will continue to experience much difficulty in school.”

During the 1980s and 1990s in the United States exactly the same misconception about the nature of language proficiency underlay the frequent early exit of bilingual students from English-as-a-second language (ESL) or bilingual programs into mainstream English-only programs on the basis of the fact that they had “acquired English.” Many of these students experienced academic difficulties within the mainstream class because no supports were in place to assist them to understand instruction and continue their development of English academic skills.

The relevance of the BICS/CALP distinction is illustrated in Vincent’s (1996) ethnographic study of second generation Salvadorean students in Washington DC. Vincent points out that the children in her study began school in an English-speaking environment and “within their first two or three years attained conversational ability in

English that teachers would regard as native-like” (p. 195). She suggests, however, that this fluency is largely deceptive:

The children seem to have much greater English proficiency than they actually do because their spoken English has no accent and they are able to converse on a few everyday, frequently discussed subjects. Academic language is frequently lacking. Teachers actually spend very little time talking with individual children and tend to interpret a small sample of speech as evidence of full English proficiency. (p. 195)

BICS/CALP made no claim to be anything more than a conceptual distinction. It provided a way of (a) naming and talking about the classroom realities that Vincent (1996) discusses and (b) highlighting the discriminatory assessment and instructional practices experienced by many bilingual students.

Evolution of the Theoretical Constructs

The initial BICS/CALP distinction was elaborated into two intersecting continua (Cummins, 1981a) that highlighted the range of cognitive demands and contextual support involved in particular language tasks or activities (context-embedded/context-reduced, cognitively undemanding/cognitively demanding). Internal and external dimensions of context were distinguished to reflect the fact that “context” is constituted both by what we bring to a task (e.g., our prior knowledge, interests, and motivation) and the range of supports that may be incorporated in the task itself (e.g., visual supports such as graphic organizers). This “quadrants” framework stimulated discussion of the instructional environment required to enable EAL students to catch up academically as quickly as possible. Specifically, it was argued that effective instruction for EAL students should focus primarily on context-embedded and cognitively demanding tasks. It was also recognized, however, that these dimensions cannot be specified in absolute terms because what is “context-embedded” or “cognitively demanding” for one learner may not be so for another as a result of differences in internal attributes such as prior knowledge or interest (Coelho, 2004; Cummins, 1981a).

The BICS/CALP distinction was maintained within this elaboration and related to the theoretical distinctions of several other theorists (e.g. Bruner’s [1975] communicative and analytic competence, Donaldson’s [1978] embedded and disembedded language, and Olson’s [1977] utterance and text). The terms used by different investigators have varied but the essential distinction refers to the extent to which the meaning being communicated is strongly supported by contextual or interpersonal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, and intonation present in face-to-face interaction) or supported primarily by linguistic cues. The term “context-reduced” was used rather than “decontextualized” in recognition of the fact that all language and literacy practices are contextualized; however, the range of supports to meaning in many academic contexts (e.g. textbook reading) is reduced in comparison to the contextual support available in face-to-face contexts.

In later accounts of the framework (Cummins, 2000, 2001) the distinction between conversational fluency and academic language proficiency was related to the work of

several other theorists. For example, Gibbons' (1991) distinction between *playground language* and *classroom language* highlighted in a particularly clear manner the linguistic challenges of classroom language demands. She notes that playground language includes the language which "enables children to make friends, join in games and take part in a variety of day-to-day activities that develop and maintain social contacts" (p. 3). She points out that this language typically occurs in face-to-face situations and is highly dependent on the physical and visual context, and on gesture and body language. However, classroom language is very different from playground language:

The playground situation does not normally offer children the opportunity to use such language as: *if we increase the angle by 5 degrees, we could cut the circumference into equal parts*. Nor does it normally require the language associated with the higher order thinking skills, such as hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting or classifying. Yet these are the language functions which are related to learning and the development of cognition; they occur in all areas of the curriculum, and without them a child's potential in academic areas cannot be realized. (1991, p. 3)

The research of Biber (1986) and Corson (1995) also provides evidence of the linguistic reality of the distinction. Corson highlighted the enormous lexical differences between typical conversational interactions in English as compared to academic or literacy-related uses of English. The high-frequency everyday lexicon of English conversation derives predominantly from Anglo-Saxon sources while the relatively lower frequency academic vocabulary is primarily Graeco-Latin in origin (see also Coxhead, 2000).

Similarly, Biber's (1986) factor analysis of more than one million words of English speech and written text from a wide variety of genres revealed underlying dimensions very consistent with the distinction between conversational and academic aspects of language proficiency. For example, when factor scores were calculated for the different text types on each factor, telephone and face-to-face conversation were at opposite extremes from official documents and academic prose on Textual Dimensions 1 and 2 (Interactive vs. Edited Text, and Abstract vs. Situated Content).

Conversational and academic language registers were also related to Gee's (1990) distinction between *primary* and *secondary* discourses (Cummins, 2001). Primary discourses are acquired through face-to-face interactions in the home and represent the language of initial socialization. Secondary discourses are acquired in social institutions beyond the family (e.g., school, business, religious, and cultural contexts) and involve acquisition of specialized vocabulary and functions of language appropriate to those settings. Secondary discourses can be oral or written and are equally central to the social life of non-literate and literate cultures. Examples of secondary discourse common in many non-literate cultures are the conventions of story-telling or the language of marriage or burial rituals which are passed down through oral tradition from one generation to the next. Within this conception, academic language proficiency represents an individual's access to and command of the specialized vocabulary and functions of language that are characteristic of the social institution of schooling. The secondary discourses of schooling are no different in principle than the secondary discourse of other

spheres of human endeavor—for example, avid amateur gardeners and professional horticulturalists have acquired vocabulary related to plants and flowers far beyond the knowledge of those not involved in this sphere of activity. What makes acquisition of the secondary discourses associated with schooling so crucial, however, is that the life chances of individuals are directly determined by the degree of expertise they acquire in understanding and using this language.

Other ways in which the original BICS/CALP distinction has evolved include:

- The addition of *discrete language skills* as a component of language proficiency that is distinct from both conversational fluency and academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2001). Discrete language skills involve the learning of rule-governed aspects of language (including phonology, grammar, and spelling) where acquisition of the general case permits generalization to other instances governed by that particular rule. Discrete language skills can sometimes be learned in virtual isolation from the development of academic language proficiency as illustrated in the fact that some students who can “read” English fluently may have only a very limited understanding of the words they can decode (see Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007, for an analysis of discrete language skills in relation to current debates on the teaching of reading in the United States).
- The embedding of the BICS/CALP distinction within a broader framework of academic development in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts that specifies the role of societal power relations in framing teacher-student interactions and determining the social organization of schooling (Cummins, 1986, 2001). Teacher-student interactions are seen as a process of negotiating identities, reflecting to varying degrees coercive or collaborative relations of power in the wider society. This socialization process within the school determines the extent to which students will engage academically and gain access to the academic registers of schooling.

Contributions of the BICS/CALP Distinction to Policy and Practice

Since its initial articulation, the distinction between BICS and CALP has influenced both policy and practice related to the instruction and assessment of second language learners. It has been invoked, for example, in policy discussions related to:

- The amount and duration of funding necessary to support students who are learning English as an additional language;
- The kinds of instructional support that EAL students need at different stages of their acquisition of conversational and academic English;
- The inclusion of EAL students in nationally-mandated high-stakes testing; for example, should EAL students be exempt from taking high-stakes tests and, if so, for how long—1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 years after arrival in the host country?
- The extent to which psychological testing of EAL students for diagnostic purposes through their L2 is valid and ethically defensible.

The distinction is discussed in numerous books that aim to equip educators with the understanding and skills required to teach and assess linguistically diverse students (e.g. Cline & Frederickson, 1996, in the United Kingdom; Coelho, 2004, in Canada; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002, in the United States) and has been invoked to interpret data from a range of sociolinguistic and educational contexts (e.g. Broome's [2004] research on reading English in multilingual South African schools).

Critiques of the BICS/CALP Distinction

The BICS/CALP distinction has also been critiqued by numerous scholars who see it as oversimplified (e.g. Scarcella, 2003; Valdés, 2004), reflective of an “autonomous” rather than an “ideological” notion of literacy (Wiley, 1996), an artifact of “test-wiseness” (Edelsky et al., 1983; Martin-Jones & Romaine, 1986) and a “deficit theory” that attributes bilingual students’ academic difficulties to their “low CALP” (e.g. Edelsky, 1990; Edelsky et al., 1983; MacSwan, 2000).

In response to these critiques, Cummins and Swain (1983) and Cummins (2000) pointed out that the construct of academic language proficiency does not in any way depend on test scores to support either its construct validity or relevance to education. This is illustrated in Vincent's (1996) ethnographic study and Biber's (1986) research on the English lexicon discussed above. Furthermore, the BICS/CALP distinction has been integrated since 1986 with a detailed sociopolitical analysis of how schools construct academic failure among subordinated groups. The framework documents educational approaches that challenge this pattern of coercive power relations and promote the generation of power and the development of academic expertise in interactions between educators and students (Cummins, 2001; Cummins, Brown & Sayers, 2007).

The broader issues in this debate go beyond the specific interpretations of the distinction between conversational fluency and academic language proficiency. They concern the nature of theoretical constructs and their intersection with research, policy and practice. Theories must be consistent with the empirical data to have any claim to validity. However, any set of theoretical constructs represents only one of potentially many ways of organizing or viewing the data. Theories frame phenomena and provide interpretations of empirical data within particular contexts and for particular purposes. However, no theory is “valid” or “true” in any absolute sense. A theory represents a way of viewing phenomena that may be relevant and useful in varying degrees depending on its purpose, how well it communicates with its intended audience, and the consequences for practice of following through on its implications (its “consequential validity”). The generation of knowledge (theory) is always dialogical and just as oral and written language is meaningless outside of a human communicative and interpretive context, so too theoretical constructs assume meaning only within specific dialogical contexts (Cummins, 2000).

Thus, the BICS/CALP distinction was initially formulated to address certain theoretical issues (e.g. whether “language proficiency” could legitimately be viewed as a unitary construct, as Oller [1979] proposed) and to interpret empirical data related to the time periods required for immigrant students to catch up academically. It spoke directly to

prejudicial policies and practices that were denying students access to equitable and effective learning opportunities.

Much of the criticism of the distinction derives from taking the constructs out of their original dialogical or discursive context and arguing that they are not useful or appropriate in a very different dialogical context. This can be illustrated in Scarcella's (2003) critique. She argues that the dichotomous conceptualization of language incorporated in the BICS/CALP distinction "is not useful for understanding the complexities of academic English or the multiple variables affecting its development" (p. 5). Both BICS and CALP are more complex than a binary distinction implies. She points out that some aspects of BICS are acquired late and some aspects of CALP are acquired early. Furthermore, some variables such as phonemic awareness (sensitivity to sounds in spoken words) are related to the development of both BICS and CALP (e.g. in helping readers to access difficult academic words). She concludes that the distinction is "of limited practical value, since it fails to operationalize tasks and therefore does not generate tasks that teachers can use to help develop their students' academic English the BICS/CALP perspective does not provide teachers with sufficient information about academic English to help their students acquire it" (p. 6).

Scarcella goes on to elaborate a detailed framework for conceptualizing academic language and generating academic tasks that is certainly far more useful and appropriate for this purpose than the notion of CALP. What she fails to acknowledge, however, is that the BICS/CALP distinction was not formulated as a tool to generate academic tasks. It addresses a very different set of theoretical, policy, and classroom instructional issues. Scarcella's critique is analogous to rejecting an apple because it is not an orange.

Related to Scarcella's critique are concerns (Valdés, 2004; Wiley, 2006) that the conversational fluency/academic language proficiency distinction reflects an "autonomous" view of language and literacy that is incompatible with the perspective of New Literacies theorists that language and literacy represent social and cultural practices that are embedded in a context of historical and current power relations (e.g. Barton, 1994; Street, 1995). As expressed by Valdés (2004, p. 115):

The view that there are multiple literacies rather than a single literacy, that these literacies depend on the context of the situation, the activity itself, the interactions between participants, and the knowledge and experiences that these various participants bring to these interactions is distant from the view held by most L2 educators who still embrace a technocratic notion of literacy and emphasise the development of decontextualised skills.

There is nothing in the BICS/CALP distinction that is inconsistent with this perspective on language and literacy practices. It makes no claim to focus on any context other than that of the school. Furthermore, the pedagogical practices that have been articulated to support the development of academic expertise (CALP) are far from the decontextualized drills appropriately castigated by numerous researchers and educators. They include a focus on critical literacy and critical language awareness together with enabling EAL and bilingual students to generate new knowledge, create literature and art, and act on social

realities, all of which directly address issues of identity negotiation and societal power relations (Cummins, 2001; Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007).

One can accept the perspective that literacies are multiple, contextually-specific, and constantly evolving (as I do) while at the same time arguing that in certain discursive contexts it is useful to distinguish between conversational fluency and academic language proficiency. To illustrate, the fact that the concept of “European” can be broken down into an almost infinite array of national, regional, and social identities does not invalidate the more general descriptor of “European”. In some discursive contexts and for some purposes it is legitimate and useful to describe an individual or a group as “European” despite the fact that it greatly oversimplifies the complex reality of “Europeanness”. Similarly, in certain discursive contexts and for certain purposes it is legitimate and useful to talk about conversational fluency and academic language proficiency despite the fact that these constructs incorporate multiple levels of complexity.

Clearly, theorists operating from a New Literacies perspective have contributed important insights into the nature and functions of literacy. However, this does not mean that a New Literacies perspective is the best or only way to address all questions of literacy development. For example, highlighting the social and contextually-specific dimensions of cognition does not invalidate a research focus on what may be happening inside the heads of individuals as they perform cognitive or linguistic tasks. There are many important questions and research studies associated with first and second language literacy development that owe little to New Literacy Studies but have played a central role in policy discussions related to equity in education. Research studies on how long it typically takes EAL students to catch up to grade norms in English academic proficiency have, within the context of the research, focused on literacy as an autonomous skill measured by standardized tests but have nevertheless contributed in substantial ways to promoting equity in schooling for bilingual students.

Future Directions

The BICS/CALP distinction was not proposed as an overall theory of language proficiency but as a very specific conceptual distinction that has important implications for policy and practice. It has drawn attention to specific ways in which educators’ assumptions about the nature of language proficiency and the development of L2 proficiency have prejudiced the academic development of bilingual students. However, the distinction is likely to remain controversial, reflecting the fact that there is no cross-disciplinary consensus regarding the nature of language proficiency and its relationship to academic development.

The most productive direction to orient further research on this topic, and one that can be supported by all scholars, is to focus on creating instructional and learning environments that maximize the language and literacy development of socially marginalized students. Because academic language is found primarily in written texts, extensive engaged reading is likely to be a crucial component of an effective learning environment (Guthrie, 2003). Opportunities for collaborative learning and talk about text are also extremely

important in helping students internalize and more fully comprehend the academic language they find in their extensive reading of text.

Writing for authentic purposes is also crucial because when bilingual students write about issues that matter to them they not only consolidate aspects of the academic language they have been reading, they also express their identities through language and (hopefully) receive feedback from teachers and others that will affirm and further develop their expression of self (Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007). Deeper understanding of the nature of academic language and its relationship both to conversational fluency and other forms of literacy will emerge from teachers, students, and researchers working together in instructional contexts collaboratively pushing (and documenting) the boundaries of language and literacy exploration.

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