

English Language Learners: Understanding BICS and CALP

Est. Time: 20 Minutes

Objective

Gain a better understanding of the difference between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), and how language differences affect classroom learning.

Overview

English Language Learners (ELLs) or English Learners (ELs) develop second-language competency at two levels.

Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS): Refers to a student’s ability to understand basic conversational English, sometimes called **social language**. At this level of proficiency, students are able to understand face-to-face social interactions and can converse in everyday social contexts. These social language skills—generally acquired in approximately two years—are sufficient for early educational experiences but are inadequate for the linguistic demands of upper elementary school and beyond.

Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP): Refers to a student’s ability to effectively understand and use the more advanced and complex language necessary for success in academic endeavors, sometimes referred to as **academic language**. Students typically acquire CALP in five to seven years, a period during which they spend a significant amount of time struggling with academic concepts in the classroom.

Activity

1. Ask for a show of hands: Who has had at least three years of instruction in another language, either in high school or college? Request that hands stay up as you increase the number of years of instruction (e.g., four, five, six).
2. Ask those individuals with the most years of instruction to translate the following items from English into their second language. You may find it helpful to have these items projected on PowerPoint slides and to have only one phrase appear at a time.
 - a. My name is _____ (insert their own name in blank).
 - b. I am thirsty. May I please have a drink of water?
 - c. After we finished school in June, my family spent our summer vacation visiting relatives in Eritrea.
 - d. Worms are called decomposers. They have a special job, which is to eat leaves, grass, and other things in nature to help break them down into smaller pieces. We are going to study worms more closely by making a compost bag.
 - e. Your math homework sheet is a review of everything we have learned so far this year: working long-division problems with double-digit divisors, calculating the area and perimeter of various quadrilaterals, working with fractions and decimals, and calculating averages.

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Questions

1. Which of the above items were representative of BICS communication? Which of CALP?
2. Why were the CALP items more difficult to translate, even with many years of instruction in a second language?
3. Teachers often hear ELs making comments such as those in (b) and then dismiss language as a potential cause when they display difficulties in class. Why do you think this is the case?
4. Imagine that you are a student whose teacher has just spoken the words seen in (e), but you are not proficient in the English language. List at least three things your teacher could do to help you understand what was being said.
5. How does this activity help you to better understand the needs of an EL?