



English Language Learners: Understanding BICS and CALP

Est. Time: 20 Minutes

Objective

To understand the difference between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), and 2) to understand 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) develop within one to three years; this is language pertaining primarily to conversational interactions. Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) takes between five to seven years to develop fully and requires the more advanced vocabulary skills necessary to be successful in school.

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.



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Activity [Cont.]

- 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.

Questions/Discussion Topics

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 students making comments such as those in (a), (b), or (c), and then dismiss language as a potential cause when those same students 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 either (d) or (e), but you are not proficient in the English language. Brainstorm a list of 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 ELL student?