

Understanding BICS and CALP

Variability Summary A

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There are two major aspects of language proficiency that must be acquired by second language learners. Jim Cummins has identified these as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), or conversational proficiency, and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or academic proficiency. The chart below outlines the differences between BICS and CALP.

Characteristics of BICS: Conversational Proficiency

- The basic language system used in face-to-face communication in informal contexts (intimate or colloquial registers)
- Largely acquired in the native language by children in all societies by the age of five
- Does not include literacy
- Includes the vocabulary of conversations
- Proficiency only weakly correlated with academic success

Characteristics of CALP: Academic Proficiency

- Includes formal and academic registers of the language
- Acquired mostly after the age of five, and acquisition continues throughout life
- Includes high levels of literacy
- Includes tens of thousands of specialized words relating to academic and formal register
- Proficiency strongly correlated with academic success

The differences between these two kinds of language proficiency are evident in a comparison of a 6-year-old and a 12-year-old native English speaker. Large differences are found in their ability to read and write English and in the depth and breadth of their vocabulary knowledge (their academic proficiency), but little difference in their conversational proficiency. Second language learners can reach peer-appropriate conversational proficiency within two years, but it takes a minimum of five to seven years for them to acquire academic proficiency in English. This distinction is important in terms of providing sufficient support for second language learners.

Source:

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

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Annela Teemant is Professor of Second Language Education (Ph.D., Ohio State University, 1997) at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Her scholarship focuses on developing, implementing, and researching applications of critical sociocultural theory and practices to the preparation of K-12 teachers of English Language Learners. Specifically, she has collaboratively developed and researched the Six Standards Instructional Coaching Model and pedagogy. She has been awarded five U.S. Department of Education grants focused on ESL teacher quality. She has authored more than 30 multimedia teacher education curricula and video ethnographies of practice and published in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Urban Education*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Language Teaching Research*. Her work describes how to use pedagogical coaching to radically improve the conditions of learning needed for multilingual learners. She has also taught adult intensive English in the United States, Finland, and Hungary.



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A St. George native, Dr. Pinnegar graduated from Dixie College (now DSU) and Southern Utah State (now SUU). She taught on the Navajo Reservation then completed an M.A. in English at BYU. She taught for 5 years in Crawfordsville, Indiana. She then completed a PhD in Educational Psychology at the University of Arizona (1989). She was faculty at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, before coming to BYU. She helped develop and now directs the TELL program. She is Acting Dean of Invisible College for Research on Teaching, a research organization that meets yearly in conjunction with AERA. She is a specialty editor of *Frontiers in Education's* Teacher Education strand with Ramona Cutri. She is editor of the series *Advancements in Research on Teaching* published by Emerald Insight. She has received the Benjamin Cluff Jr. award for research and the Sponsored Research Award from ORCA at BYU. She is a founder of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices research methodology. She has published in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Ed Researcher*, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* and has contributed to the handbook of narrative inquiry, two international handbooks of teacher education and two Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices handbooks. She reviews for numerous journals and presents regularly at the American Educational Research Association, ISATT, and the Castle Conference sponsored by S-STTEP.



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