

May 2020 - **Lecture 5**    *Cummins’ language proficiency : BICS vs. CALP*

Prof. Jim CUMMINS (from Toronto, Canada), is one of the world’s leading authorities in the field of SLA and bilingual education. To draw educators’ attention to the challenges that SL learners encounter, he put forward an important distinction in the process of acquiring proficiency in a language other than the mother tongue; BICS and CALP, two kinds of language development:

**BICS:** Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills are ‘surface’ skills, listening and speaking in particular, which are typically acquired in day-to-day language and used for social interaction. Such skills are usually acquired in playgrounds, playing sports, parties, talking in school bus, phones... Conversational fluency can be reached in a relatively short time, from 6 months to 2 years of practice.

**CALP:** Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, on the other hand, refers to academic learning including the four skills. The academic abilities in various subject areas are essential for students’ success. The time needed to attain such proficiency is much longer than for BICS; 5 to 7 years and it may reach 10 years or more.

Thus, for Cummins (2013, p. 65), “*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.*”

It then shouldn’t be assumed that SL learners having attained a high degree of fluency in everyday conversation also possess equivalent academic language proficiency. What these learners need is more time to acquire academic capacities that they can only attain by studying various subject areas in the language in question.

**Two continua proposed by Cummins (1981a) - Language Tasks Activities**

<b>B I C S</b> - - - - -	- - - - - <b>▶</b> <b>C A L P</b>
Context-embedded	Context-reduced
Cognitively Undemanding	Cognitively Demanding
6 months to 2 years Playground language Down-to-earth skills Face-to-face situation Physical/Visual contexts	5 to 7 years + Classroom language Higher order thinking skills: hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting...

Evidence of such distinctions are provided by other researchers in SLA (e.g. Cline & Frederickson, 1996) as well as educators and psychologists understanding that conflating the two aspects of proficiency leads to major issues and difficulties for bilingual students.      .../...